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The Autobiographical Impulse in Byzantium

MICHAEL ANGOLD

To the memory of Alexander Kazhdan

I

It has often been noted that the intellectual and cultural histories of Byzantium and the Latin West demonstrate a curious parallelism. The Carolingian Renaissance has, for example, its counterpart in the Macedonian Renaissance. So it was with autobiography. St. Augustine's *Confessions* were matched in the Greek East by a series of contemporary autobiographical works by both pagans and Christians. Thereafter the writing of autobiography to all intents and purposes ceased in both East and West, only to revive quite suddenly in the course of the eleventh century. Attention has focused on the reappearance of autobiography in the Latin West. This is easy to understand. The best-known examples come from the West, in the shape of Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* and Guibert of Nogent's *De Vita sive Monodiae*. Their aim was to illuminate the meaning and inner purpose of their lives. They fulfilled, in other words, the basic criterion of autobiography. They both had a good literary pedigree. Guibert of Nogent found inspiration in Augustine's *Confessions*, while Abelard ingeniously exploited the letter of consolation for autobiographical purposes. The personal concerns of these autobiographies fitted neatly with the notion of the rediscovery of the individual—or, perhaps better, of the “self”—which has been proposed as a defining characteristic of the twelfth-century renaissance.¹

It is much harder to categorize Byzantine autobiography. The starting point has to be G. Misch's monumental, but neglected, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*. It contains, among many other things, what is still the only detailed and systematic examination of Byzantine autobiography.² Misch concentrated on the continuities that he liked to believe linked Byzantine education and literature to the classical world. He was therefore inclined to

¹Guibert de Nogent, *Autobiographie*, ed. E.-R. Labande (Paris, 1981). *Confiteor* is the first word of the text; *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. J. T. Muckle, *Medieval Studies* 12 (1950), 163–213; C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (London, 1972), 64–95. Cf. C. W. Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982), 82–109, where stress is placed on the importance of relationships for the individual.

²G. Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, II.2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1962), 766–830. Cf. H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (Munich, 1978), I, 165–70, for a modern treatment. See also M. Hinterberger, *Autobiographische Traditionen in Byzanz*, WByzSt 21 (Vienna, 1999).

underline similarities between Byzantine and classical Greek autobiographies. To his mind Byzantine autobiographies divided into the same three categories that he identified in classical autobiography: historical, religious, and literary.³ The *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos provided him with an example of a “historical” autobiography or memoirs. For “religious” autobiography he turned to the autobiographies of Nikephoros Blemmydes, while those of Nikephoros Basilakes and Gregory of Cyprus served as examples of “literary” autobiography. His selection of these texts for detailed discussion strengthened his case that Byzantine autobiography was a continuation of a classical tradition. Misch was aware that they did not exhaust autobiographical writing in Byzantium, but he rapidly passed over other examples, such as Emperor Michael Palaiologos’ autobiography.⁴

Misch’s treatment of Byzantine autobiography reflected his conviction that European autobiography had its roots in classical Greece. He was unwilling to accept that Augustine’s *Confessions* were the first true autobiography. It would mean admitting that autobiography emerged not from classical antiquity, but “from religious inwardness, of which the Christian practice of self-examination is characteristic.”⁵ It would also mean that autobiography was essentially a subjective and not objective exercise. It suited Misch’s case that Byzantium never knew Augustine’s *Confessions*. Misch could use Byzantine autobiography to support his views about the importance of classical antiquity to the development of autobiography. To do so he had to stress the conventionality of Byzantine autobiography and to see it as part of a literary tradition inherited from the Hellenistic age.

Misch presented Byzantine autobiography as part of a continuing literary tradition. He was aware of the chronological gap that separated the Greek autobiographies of late antiquity and Byzantine autobiographies, but did not consider that this constituted serious grounds for doubting their essential continuity. He glossed over the striking fact that Byzantine authors of the eleventh century and later seem deliberately to have overlooked as models examples of Greek autobiography from late antiquity. Neither the pagan Libanius nor the Christian Synesius, bishop of Cyrene, inspired Byzantine imitators. Gregory Nazianzen had a reputation in Byzantium to rival that of Augustine in the West, but his autobiographical poems never had the currency nor the authority of Augustine’s *Confessions*.⁶ It is therefore difficult to accept Misch’s contention that the major impulse behind the reappearance of autobiography in Byzantium in the eleventh century was a simple revival of classical literary tradition. It was rather more complicated than this. There is no denying that the relevance of the Hellenic ideal to a Christian society was an important theme in the Byzantine autobiographies that Misch chose to examine. He took this as evidence that classical literature exercised a direct influence on the revival of autobiography in Byzantium. But this theme pointed not to the past but to a contemporary problem for many educated Byzantines. It was a medieval dilemma. Classical autobiographies offered scant guidance.

Like many scholars of his generation, Misch had a poor opinion of Byzantium. He

³Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 749–59.

⁴*Ibid.*, 752–55.

⁵G. Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, 2 vols. (London, 1950), I, 16.

⁶*Ibid.*, II, 554–63, 594–99, 600–624. See also C. White, *Gregory of Nazianzus: Autobiographical Poems*, Cambridge Medieval Classics 6 (Cambridge, 1996).

ended his study of Michael Psellos by accusing him of betraying the Hellenic ideal: "What a gulf separates the Byzantine intellectual from the philosophical Ideal of free men, who desire to live in Truth and Clarity"!⁷ He failed to see that Psellos had little interest in slavishly imitating classical models. His *Chronographia* was an original reworking of the classical mode of history writing, largely achieved through the autobiographical emphasis he imparted.

Misch failed to do justice to the originality of Byzantine literature. For his own purposes he concentrated on only those autobiographies that seemed to fit the classical mold. This left him in a false position: his narrow choice went counter to his conviction that a characteristic of autobiography as a literary genre was its wealth of forms. In his own words, "hardly any form is alien to it."⁸ A. Kazhdan has shown that from the eleventh century the conventional forms of Byzantine literature were given new life and meaning by the injection of personal information and a personal viewpoint.⁹ But this is incidental as opposed to deliberate autobiography, which aims at the direct illumination of the author's life. The latter is an undertaking that few attempt, even in a self-obsessed age such as our own. No wonder that some of the first autobiographical writings in Byzantium were disguised. But it went further than this. The preferred form of autobiography in Byzantium was as a preface to a monastic rule, or *typikon*, or as a preamble to a will. It is not clear that these were designed as literature at all.¹⁰ They had no connection with any classical tradition.

Misch's presentation of Byzantine autobiography has its merits, but the emphasis on a classical background makes it somewhat one-sided. Underlying this was an idealism that nowadays strikes a false note. It does seem unlikely that autobiography will reveal the essential core of any personality and still more unlikely that it will conform to some classical ideal. It was such a conviction that led Misch to criticize Byzantine autobiographers for dealing in superficialities, but this was a failure to recognize that Byzantine assumptions were different from those of classical antiquity. It was also a failure to come to terms with the uncomfortable fact that the protective mask or *persona* may be all that there is. Κάτω ἀπὸ μία προσωπίδα ἓνα κενό! For the historian, a concentration on the role assumed and the pressures and opportunities it created may be more valuable than probing beneath the surface searching for the inner core of personality. But even if Byzantine autobiography celebrates the *persona* rather than the *ego*, it still introduces a strongly personal note, which was at odds with the impersonality of official life in Byzantium.

Because of his idealization of the individual, Misch minimizes the obstacles there were to the writing of autobiography. He considered it all too human an activity. The truth is that the naked concentration on the individual and the personal was normally deemed "unnatural." Why otherwise should so little in the way of autobiographical writing survive from either the classical period or the Middle Ages? Those who made the

⁷ Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 830.

⁸ Misch, *History*, I, 4.

⁹ A. Kazhdan with S. Franklin, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. 224–55.

¹⁰ M. J. Angold, "Were Byzantine Monastic *Typika* Literature?" in *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, ed. R. Beaton and C. Roueché (Aldershot, 1993), 46–70. Cf. K. A. Manaphes, *Μοναστηριακά τυπικά—διαθήκαι* (Athens, 1970).

attempt normally had a claim to be exemplars in one way or another. They believed their wisdom and experience worth passing on. They were also celebrating their exemplary role in society. The personal element was therefore almost inevitably entangled with cultural and social self-assertion.

Misch was looking for the Byzantine *psyche* and did not like what he found. But a historical, as opposed to literary, evaluation of Byzantine autobiography has to have other, more concrete, aims. It has to start by explaining how and why autobiography revived in Byzantium; it has to classify the forms that autobiography took and establish its main themes; it has to identify who wrote autobiography and for whom and with what purposes in mind. But there remains the question of what constitutes autobiography. Is it any text that contains personal information? If the increasing number of such texts points to the strength of the autobiographical impulse, personal information is not of itself autobiography. J. Sturrock has defined the essence of autobiography in the following terms: "Autobiography raises into consciousness whatever unconscious process the autobiographer accepts has brought him to his present condition."¹¹ It is a way of establishing a psychological identity. In other words, autobiography reveals what the author believes to be the forces and events that have given significance to his life or to his role in life.

II

The impersonality of official life in Byzantium rendered autobiography more or less irrelevant from the sixth century on. A formal and hierarchical concept of church and state was reflected in and reinforced by a literary activity that was governed by convention and aimed at objectivity. Typical of Byzantine literary production in the late ninth and tenth centuries were the handbooks (*taktika*) and encyclopedias, histories in the form of imperial biographies, official cycles of saints' lives (*menologia* and *synaxaria*), not to mention court and ecclesiastical rhetoric.¹² Even literature for private enjoyment was stilted by the conventions of public life. This all helped to stifle the production of autobiography, which is personal and subjective.

From the turn of the tenth century, however, come the first stirrings of autobiography in Byzantium. They are associated with monastic founders and reformers of the time. One such was John Xenos who founded a series of monasteries in his native Crete. His will has survived¹³ and can be dated to the patriarchate of Alexios the Studite (1025–43). Unlike earlier wills, it contains autobiographical information, so much so that it came to serve his community in lieu of a saint's life. In the preamble to his will John sketches his background: he was born into a prosperous Cretan family. From an early age he was

¹¹J. Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Cambridge, 1993), 6.

¹²P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris, 1971), 267–300.

¹³H. Delehay, *Deux typica byzantins de l'époque des Paléologues* (Brussels, 1921), 191–96. See L. Petit, "St. Jean Xénos ou l'Ermite d'après son autobiographie," *AB* 42 (1924), 5–20. A more famous monk, Nikon Metanoieite (d. ca. 997), has left a will. It contains much autobiographical information, especially about the circumstances of the foundation of his monastery at Sparta. I decided against using it because it only survives in a modern Greek version, first published at Venice in 1780. See Sp. Lampros, "Διαθήκη Νίκωνος," *Νέος Έλλ.* 3 (1906), 223–28. On the remains of the monastery, see G. B. Waywell and J. J. Wilkes, "Medieval Reuse of the Roman Stoa: The Church and Monastery of St. Nikon Metanoieites," *BSA* 89 (1994), 424–49.

overcome with a desire to follow a solitary life. He roamed the mountains and moorlands of his native island, until one day he found a cave that harbored two funerary monuments. As he left the cave he heard a voice instructing him to build a church there. This he did. He had found his vocation, the building of churches, which he organized into a monastic confederation. A will provided the occasion to set out his achievements, both as a memorial and an inspiration for his followers and as a legal guarantee of the continued existence of his monastic community. The needs of a monastic leader turned a will into a vehicle for autobiography.

Compared with the relatively obscure figure of John Xenos, Athanasios the Athonite stood out among the monastic leaders of his time. He too was moved to record for the benefit of his community relevant autobiographical details, not in a will, but in the preface to the *typikon* he gave his foundation of the Lavra on Mount Athos.¹⁴ Athanasios wished to put on record the circumstances that made his foundation of the Lavra possible. These hinged on his friendship with the future emperor Nikephoros Phocas (963–969), who provided Athanasios with the necessary funds. He also undertook to become a monk and to join Athanasios on Mount Athos. His elevation to the imperial throne was to rule this out. The news of his accession stunned Athanasios, whose immediate reaction was to stop work on his foundation. He then set off for the capital in order to remonstrate with the new emperor. Suitably contrite, Phocas implored Athanasios—the text gives his words in direct speech—to carry on his work. He promised that when times were more propitious he would come to Athos. Athanasios believed that Phocas would have honored this pledge had he not been assassinated.

Here was autobiography in an embryonic form. It distinguished Athanasios' rule from the Studite rule, to which it was otherwise much indebted. It added a personal dimension that the Studite rule lacks. The latter was dominated by the need to provide the monks with a strict timetable and a rigorous discipline. Characteristic was the tariff of punishments for trifling offenses, such as not returning books to the library on time! Athanasios fails to make clear why he needed to add autobiographical details to his *typikon*. Given the prestige of the Studite rule, it was an important step. Athanasios was the advocate of a different kind of monasticism, loosely termed lavriot, which sought to combine both the eremitical and cenobitic ideals.¹⁵ Athanasios was not just contrasting his form of monastic organization with the Studite. He had also to defend it against the hermits and hesychasts who until his arrival had dominated the life of the holy mountain. There is an implicitly polemical element to the autobiographical details Athanasios supplies. Imperial support was important to his enterprise and set him apart from the hermits who gravitated to Athos. It was therefore necessary to exonerate Phocas, even if it required special pleading.

Athanasios was the most distinguished of a line of tenth-century monastic reformers who either came from great aristocratic houses or were closely connected with them. From this background came St. Symeon the New Theologian as well. Like St. Athanasios he was from an Anatolian family and was sent to Constantinople for his education.

¹⁴ Ph. Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden für die Geschichte der Athosklöster* (Leipzig, 1894), 102–7.

¹⁵ D. Papachryssanthou, "La vie monastique dans les campagnes byzantines du VIII^e au XI^e siècle," *Byzantion* 43 (1973), 58–80; R. Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium, 843–1118* (Cambridge, 1995), 31–63.

Thanks to family connections Symeon entered imperial service, and a glittering career beckoned. But even more seductive was the call of the cloister. He became infatuated with a leading mystic of the day, who was a monk at Stoudios. The monk had the good sense to curb Symeon's youthful impetuosity, which many at the time found unhealthy. Only when Symeon reached mature years did the monk of Stoudios take him on in order to instruct him in the path of mysticism. In due course, Symeon moved to the rundown monastery of St. Mamas inside the capital, restored it,¹⁶ and made it the center of a cult for his spiritual father. Symeon revived the mystical tradition in Byzantium through his example and in his voluminous writings. He put great stress on the divine light. At the moment the mystic made contact with the godhead he was bathed in the uncreated light that Christ and the apostles experienced on Mount Tabor. It was proof, even if of a highly subjective kind, of the validity of the mystical path to God. The mystic was in direct contact with God, in the same way that the apostles had been, or so Symeon insisted. This placed him above the official hierarchy. Symeon would claim that the powers of binding and loosing belonged to the mystic and not to emperors, bishops, and priests. The mystic would exercise them in a rather different way from the official hierarchy of church and state. It would be done through his role as a spiritual father with the emphasis on his responsibility to hear confession.¹⁷

No rule drawn up by Symeon for his monastery survives, if indeed it ever existed. But one of his sermons takes the form of disguised autobiography. In it he sets out his own search for perfection, but in the guise of a young man he calls George. Rather ingenuously Symeon confessed to knowing him well, "because he had been my friend and childhood companion."¹⁸ In this sermon Symeon comes close to true autobiography because it was a way of making sense of his own life and presenting it as a guide to his audience. Was the community aware of the deception? Did the monks recognize their abbot in the guise of his "friend and childhood companion"? His hagiographer Nicetas Stethatos certainly did.¹⁹ But why should Symeon have been so diffident? It is likely that he was following a monastic tradition of humility and anonymity: he had begun his monastic career at Stoudios. His misgivings can only have been magnified by the suspicion in which mystical experience was held at the time by the church authorities. Sturrock has said that "autobiographers need an excuse for indulging to the extent that they do in self-advertisement."²⁰ Symeon would have found little excuse for autobiography in the Studite tradition in which he was steeped. But he was feeling his way to a different understanding of monasticism, where individual experience was paramount, whence the need to resort to disguised autobiography. The thrust of his teaching was the centrality

¹⁶D. Krausmüller, "The Monastic Communities of Stoudios and St. Mamas in the Second Half of the Tenth Century," in *The Theotokos Evergetis and Eleventh-Century Monasticism*, ed. M. Mullett and A. Kirby (Belfast, 1994), 67–85.

¹⁷B. Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022): Life—Spirituality—Doctrine*, trans. A. P. Gythiel (New York, 1986), esp. 125–40; H. J. M. Turner, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood* (Leiden-New York, 1990), 16–69, 118–90.

¹⁸Symeon the New Theologian, *Catéchèses*, ed. B. Krivochéine, trans. J. Paramelle, II (Paris, 1964), no. xxii, 364–93.

¹⁹I. Hausherr, *Un grand mystique byzantin: Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien par Nicéas Stéthatos* (Rome, 1928), lvi–lxvii.

²⁰Sturrock, *Autobiography*, 7.

of individual experience of God. He also stressed the prime importance of confession to the monastic life. This too points in the direction of autobiography.

Symeon's enduring influence on Byzantine monasticism remains problematic. It is not possible to establish any convincing link with the monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis, which was at the heart of a monastic revival in Constantinople from the mid-eleventh century. However, Symeon was the posthumous inspiration of the monastery of Kyr Philotheos, whose founder was an adept of Symeon's cult. He made frequent visits to the saint's tomb and studied his writings which he committed to memory. He was said to have "the saint within him in his entirety." This monastery seems in many ways to have anticipated the ideals and organization associated with the Evergetis.²¹ Thanks to the efforts of his hagiographer, Nicetas Stethatos, Symeon's cult took root in Constantinople. It gained the powerful support of Patriarch Michael Keroularios (1043–58), who presided over the translation of Symeon's relics to Constantinople in 1052 and his subsequent recognition as a saint.²²

III

It is no surprise that the first signs of autobiography in Byzantium should appear in a monastic setting where there was a new stress on inspiration and the individual, but they came in a disguised or tentative form. The obstacles in the way of the full and open development of autobiography were still there even in the late eleventh century, as becomes clear from Kekaumenos' "Book of Advice," known conventionally as his *Strategikon*.²³ Because it was written very largely on the basis of his own experience, the assumption has always been that it can be classed as an autobiography. As such, it is, however, a disappointment. Kekaumenos is reticent in the extreme about himself. He sets out to present his experience as objectively as he can. He scarcely ever features himself in incidents in which he must have been involved. He is more forthcoming about members of his family.²⁴ He recalls the exploits of his grandfathers and even of a great-grandfather. On one occasion he tells us that he has heard the story from his father.²⁵ He had access to a family archive, from which he extracted a document from the reign of Basil II.²⁶ Nearer his own time, he made use of and quoted from a written account left by one of his relatives about an uprising in Thessaly in 1066 and about his subsequent imprisonment.²⁷ Kekaumenos was putting his own experience and the accumulated experience of his family at the service of both his sons and his emperor, who is to be identified with Michael

²¹ M. J. Angold, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261* (Cambridge, 1995), 269–70.

²² Hausherr, *Vie de Syméon*, xvii, 207.

²³ *Cecaumeni Strategikon et incerti scriptoris de Officiis regis libellus*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1896; repr. Amsterdam, 1965); *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena*, ed. G. G. Litavrin (Moscow, 1972). See Ch. Roueché, "Byzantine Writers and Readers: Storytelling in the Eleventh Century," in *The Greek Novel, A.D. 1–1985*, ed. R. Beaton (London, 1988), 123–33; J. Shepard, "A Suspected Source of Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*: The Great Catacalon Cecaumenos," *BMGS* 16 (1992), 171–81.

²⁴ P. Lemerle, *Prolégomènes à une édition critique et commentée des "Conseils et Récits" de Kékauménos* (Brussels, 1959), 20–46.

²⁵ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 39.13; ed. Litavrin, 196.1.

²⁶ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 96.13–22; ed. Litavrin, 280.15–282.3.

²⁷ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 72–73; ed. Litavrin, 266.1–3.

VII Doukas (1071–78).²⁸ But modesty forbade that he intrude himself. He sought to stifle any autobiographical impulse. He allows himself two or three passing references,²⁹ but on only one occasion does he have anything directly to say about himself. It is to justify his writing, which he does in the following terms:

For I am without learning, not having received a Hellenic education, which has meant that I cannot turn an elegant phrase and I have not been taught eloquence. I know that people make fun of me, playing on my ignorance, but I am not writing some poetic composition for others; I am writing for you and your brothers, my children, the fruit of my loins, whom God has given me. I have composed this not with elegant periods and with deceiving images, which are entirely without moral value, but I have set out what I have done and suffered and seen and heard about, matters that are true; things that are done and happen in everyday life. The style may be somewhat pedestrian, but, if you consider the things related in a proper state of mind, you will find them full of truth.³⁰

At last, Kekaumenos relents and reveals something of himself, but the autobiographical element is stifled. Kekaumenos subscribed to the belief that individuality should be subordinated to the interests of the family: he showed little interest in making sense of his own life, except insofar as he was working for the good of his immediate family. In the same way that an abbot might place his experience as a guide and an inspiration for his community, Kekaumenos is seeking to inculcate his sons with lessons for life. One of those lessons was that the family was more important than any single individual. “Don’t overlook your relatives and God won’t overlook you” was a typical piece of Kekaumenos’ wisdom.³¹

Kekaumenos was also inclined to subordinate his individuality to the needs of the emperor on the grounds that “the emperor at Constantinople always wins.” This was a conventional piece of wisdom that was already becoming out of date by Kekaumenos’ day. There are signs, though, that he was aware how the world was changing. He was all too conscious of his lack of education, which put him at a disadvantage in court circles. He was suspicious of the “philosophers” and the civil servants who ran the court and government at Constantinople. These were the men behind Constantine IX Monomachos, whom he blamed for “destroying and desolating the Empire of the Romans,”³² men such as Michael Psellos.

Kekaumenos may not mention Psellos by name, but he includes a story that can only have been directed against him. It concerns Emperor Augustus and Athenodorus—a poor man, but honest and sagacious. The emperor had him brought to his court at Rome, so that he could act as his moral tutor. Athenodorus cross-examined him daily about his deeds and his state of mind, “until he made him morally perfect.”³³ This was clearly a

²⁸ Lemerle, *Prologomènes*, 19–20.

²⁹ E.g., Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 60.11; ed. Litavrin, 238.25–26, where he recalls his acquaintance with John, bishop of Larissa, when he was governor in Thessaly.

³⁰ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 75–76; ed. Litavrin, 272.12–23.

³¹ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 52.25; ed. Litavrin, 222.32.

³² Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 99.22; ed. Litavrin, 288.1–2.

³³ Kekaumenos, ed. Wassiliewsky and Jernstedt, 100–101; ed. Litavrin, 290.11–292.6. What makes it even more likely that Kekaumenos aimed this story at Psellos is that the latter liked to compare himself with the philosophers Arrian and Rusticus who ministered to Augustus: K. N. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική βιβλιοθήκη* (Venice-Paris, 1874), V, 509.5–9 (hereafter Sathas, *MB*).

plea on Kekaumenos' part that Emperor Michael VII Doukas allow himself to be guided by a moral counselor—a spiritual father, in other words—without intellectual pretensions, rather than by his former tutor Michael Psellos. Contemporaries considered that Psellos had overeducated his imperial charge, to the point where he was unfit to govern.³⁴

Unlike Kekaumenos, Michael Psellos had little compunction about introducing himself whenever he could into his many discourses. Psellos was a phenomenon: his writings were on such a massive scale and his range of interests so broad that no modern scholar has done justice to his achievements.³⁵ A new stress on the individual and on the human dimension was Psellos' specific contribution to his times. Flesh and blood were what counted. He insisted: "I am an earthly being made of flesh and blood, so that illnesses seem to me to be illnesses, blows blows, traumas traumas, however much I may reject the well-known saying that man is the measure of all things."³⁶ This did not prevent him from vindicating his autonomy as an individual with the words: "It is not necessary for me to be measured by the hands of others: I am for myself both the measure and the norm!"³⁷

It was an outlook that stressed the primacy of personal relations. Psellos wrote to a friend: "I carry your image in my soul. . . . You are always with me in memory. But I want to see you with my eyes and to hear your sweet voice in my ears."³⁸ In his writings Psellos sought to present others in relationship to himself: they existed through his experience of them. This was a necessary part of the self-awareness that makes autobiography possible. Thus his funeral oration for his mother becomes an autobiographical account of his childhood.³⁹ He explains why this should be: "Let no one think the worse of me, if I speak about myself. It is not a matter of self-advertisement (περιαυτολογία), but a means of demonstrating (αἰτιολογία) my mother's virtues."⁴⁰ This may have been Psellos' intention, but he places himself at the center of things. It is an account of *his* childhood over which his mother presided. She was a stern mother who hid her love. He was not allowed fairy stories, but had to listen to uplifting tales from the Old Testament. His mother would talk to him about virginity and discourse about the saved and the damned. In his words, "she subordinated maternal love to a higher law and a better judgment, so that I did not become too full of myself and I remained obedient to her commands."⁴¹ However, when she thought he was fast asleep, she would kiss him and say, "O, my darling child, how much I love you; I can't give you enough kisses!"⁴² She was more openly affectionate to her daughter, who was the darling of the family. Psellos compares himself unfavorably to his sister. She lived up to her mother's expectations in a way that he failed to do. Her death was a family calamity. Psellos describes her funeral in some detail, but

³⁴ Ἡ συνέχεια τῆς Χρονογραφίας τοῦ Ἰωάννου Σκυλίτζη (*Ioannes Skylitzes Continuatus*), ed. E. Th. Tsolakes (Thessalonica, 1968), 156.5–8; John Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, ed. Th. Büttner-Wobst, III (Bonn, 1897), 708.8.

³⁵ Ja. N. Ljubarskij, *Mikhail Psell: Lichnost' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1978), remains the best treatment.

³⁶ Sathas, *MB*, V, 232.25–233.1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.1–3.

³⁸ Michael Psellos, *Scripta minora*, ed. E. Kurtz and F. Drexler, II (Milan, 1941), no. 138, 165.2–6.

³⁹ Sathas, *MB*, V, 3–61. Cf. U. Criscuolo, *Michele Psello, Autobiografia. Encomio per la madre* (Naples, 1989–90).

⁴⁰ Sathas, *MB*, V, 11.12–14; ed. Criscuolo, 94.260–62.

⁴¹ Sathas, *MB*, V, 17.26–28; ed. Criscuolo, 101.474–76.

⁴² Sathas, *MB*, V, 18.1–3; ed. Criscuolo, 101–2.480–81.

her death is defined by his grief.⁴³ Following her death his mother went into retreat and persuaded her husband to become a monk.

Psellos' father is a shadowy figure. He was not easily roused to anger and not much given to words. But Psellos remembered him as a fine figure of a man and was proud of their physical resemblance.⁴⁴ Psellos was present at his deathbed along with his mother. His grief was intensified by her harsh words. She turned to him and said, "Secular learning has earned you nothing, son, in the way of Christian piety. Your education, your love of learning has all been in vain!"⁴⁵ Psellos derived some consolation from a dream he had shortly afterward, in which his father appeared to him. He was wearing the habit in which he had been buried, but was even more radiant than he had been in life. He told his son that he had seen God and had interceded on his behalf. Psellos confessed to him that he was not as good a Christian as he should be, but he was hindered by the pressures of public life. He beseeched his father to continue to intercede with the Lord and to free him from the world of the senses.⁴⁶

This was the dilemma that Psellos explored in the funeral oration for his mother. How to reconcile Christian piety with "Hellenic" learning! His mother had done all she could—including conjuring up a vision of St. John Chrysostom⁴⁷—to insure that Psellos continued with his education, but somehow he felt he had disappointed her.⁴⁸ Psellos was denied the opportunity of a deathbed reconciliation with his mother; he arrived too late. He saw his mother's corpse and fell into a swoon, so intense was his anguish. Once again a death is defined by his grief. Sometime later Psellos had a vision. He was led along a narrow path blocked by a wall of polished stone. His guides showed him an opening through which he slid head first. He then descended a ladder and found himself in a church. There in front of an icon of the Mother of God he saw his mother and rushed over to her. She stayed him and told him to look to his right. He saw a monk on his knees praying, a writing tablet in his hands. "Who is that?" he asked his mother. "St. Basil," was the reply. They approached to pay their respects; the saint looked up and nodded. Then he was gone in a rumble of thunder, Psellos' mother was nowhere to be seen, and Psellos came to his senses.⁴⁹ He interpreted this vision as a sign that his mother finally approved of his choice of philosophy as a way of life.⁵⁰ The figure of St. Basil was deliberately chosen to emphasize that Psellos was approaching the study of the ancient philosophers in a Christian manner. Psellos concludes the funeral oration with a celebration, not of his mother's piety or other qualities, but of his own intellectual curiosity and appetite. The purpose of his mother's life thus becomes clear: it was to make possible Psellos' intellectual eminence, but with one proviso. Psellos might find in ancient philosophy "an inexhaustible treasury of wisdom"⁵¹ and might enjoy classical literature for its own sake,⁵² but

⁴³Sathas, *MB*, V, 28–31; ed. Criscuolo, 114–17.

⁴⁴Sathas, *MB*, V, 19–20; ed. Criscuolo, 103–4.

⁴⁵Sathas, *MB*, V, 40.6–8; ed. Criscuolo, 127.1216–20.

⁴⁶Sathas, *MB*, V, 41–42; ed. Criscuolo, 128–30.

⁴⁷Sathas, *MB*, V, 12–13; ed. Criscuolo, 95–97.

⁴⁸Sathas, *MB*, V, 17.6; ed. Criscuolo, 100.452–54.

⁴⁹Sathas, *MB*, V, 52–54; ed. Criscuolo, 142–44.

⁵⁰Sathas, *MB*, V, 52.18–21, 54.5–7; ed. Criscuolo, 142.1630–33, 144.1685–87.

⁵¹Sathas, *MB*, V, 58.11; ed. Criscuolo, 149.1825.

⁵²Sathas, *MB*, V, 59.19–21; ed. Criscuolo, 150–51.1867–70.

she had instilled in him a proper Christian outlook, which in the end was proof against worldly success.⁵³

There are autobiographical elements in almost everything Psellos wrote. Not even hagiography escaped. He wrote the *Life of St. Auxentios*, a relatively obscure saint credited with the foundation of a monastery that flourished in Psellos' time. He reshaped an earlier *Life* to give the saint some of his own features: there are common experiences and a similarity of outlook. He attributed to the saint his own interest in demonology. He confessed to enjoying music just like the saint.⁵⁴

Psellos gave history an autobiographical twist. Misch has labeled his *Chronographia* "Fragments of an Autobiography."⁵⁵ This is a fair enough description, though the work is perhaps better understood as memoirs rather than as a straightforward autobiography. The *Chronographia* purported to be a continuation of that series of Byzantine histories that began with the chronicler Theophanes in the early ninth century,⁵⁶ but contemporaries recognized that it was rather different from its precursors.⁵⁷ What Psellos did with his history, as he did with other literary forms, was to take a genre and convert it to personal ends. Psellos' method was to filter history through his own experience. He includes passages—often substantial—of autobiography. Their purpose was to emphasize his qualifications to be the historian of his own time and to sit in judgment on his contemporaries, from emperors and patriarchs on down. He would use history to set his stamp on the history of his own times. In a letter of his to a contemporary, he lets it be known that he is embarking on a *Chronographia* and it would be wise to be nice to him.⁵⁸ Psellos used his *Chronographia* to defend himself against a variety of charges. For example, at one point he inserts a ringing affirmation of his orthodoxy. This was a way of countering the charges of heresy leveled against him, charges that he fails to specify in the *Chronographia*, but which were well known.⁵⁹

The ostensible focus of the *Chronographia* always remained the emperor to whom the adult Psellos related in much the same way that the young Psellos had to his mother. The fate and qualities of emperors are seen through the prism of Psellos' intelligence and experience. At times the latter become the true focal point of the history. Psellos insinuates himself into the historical process. The history of his times is punctuated by the stages of his life. So he was in his twenty-fifth year when he entered the service of Constantine IX Monomachos. This is the signal for a long digression on his education.⁶⁰ It was central to his history, for his mastery of philosophy not only provided him with his credentials as a historian, but was also the foundation of his political career. For a brief period, from 1057 to 1059, he was at the center of events. He eased Emperor Isaac Komnenos on to the imperial throne and off again and was responsible for the deposition

⁵³ Sathas, *MB*, V, 61.6–25; ed. Criscuolo, 152–53.1919–39.

⁵⁴ A. Kazhdan, "Hagiographical Notes: 3," *Byzantion* 53 (1983), 546–56; E. A. Fisher, "Michael Psellos on the Rhetoric of Hagiography and the *Life of St. Auxentius*," *BMGS* 17 (1993), 43–53.

⁵⁵ Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 760.

⁵⁶ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, I i; VI, lxxiii: ed. E. Renauld, *Chronographie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1926–28), I, 2.1–5, 152–53; trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1966), 27, 191.

⁵⁷ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn, CFHB 5 (Berlin-New York, 1973), 3.18–19.

⁵⁸ Sathas, *MB*, V, 352–53; cf. 513.8–12.

⁵⁹ Angold, *Church and Society*, 31–35.

⁶⁰ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI, xxxvi–xlv: ed. Renauld, I, 134–39; trans. Sewter, 173–78.

of Patriarch Michael Keroularios.⁶¹ At this point history becomes autobiography, but this was exceptional. It was more usual for Psellos to adopt the role of observer and commentator. It allowed him to emphasize that without the historian there would be no history.

In his *Chronographia*, just as in his funeral oration for his mother, Psellos subverts a traditional literary genre for autobiographical purposes. The result was autobiography in disguise. It had certain advantages. It forced Psellos to assess the meaning and purpose of his childhood and of his public life, not in isolation, but in terms of relationships, whether personal or political. The very fact that Psellos had to proceed by stealth only confirms the strength of the autobiographical impulse in eleventh-century Byzantium.

Was Psellos motivated by anything more than rampant egotism? Psellos had a very clear idea of what his role should ideally be. He was the “philosopher” who by virtue of his education and superior intelligence guided the actions of emperors. The “philosopher” was therefore central to Byzantine society and his wisdom and experience counted for just as much as that of the mystic.⁶² In his correspondence with patriarchs Michael Keroularios and John Xiphilinos, Psellos contrasted the ideals of the mystic and the humanist, to the advantage of the latter. He claimed that “a throne has been set aside for me, which is no less high and imposing than yours, nor in any way inferior.”⁶³ Did Christ “not often frequent the marketplace and much less frequently the mountains?”⁶⁴ Psellos was arguing that lay society, not just monastic communities, provided a proper setting for a Christian life. The “philosopher” had just as much to contribute as the “mystic” in terms of spiritual guidance. To exemplify his ideal of the “philosopher,” Psellos drew on his own experience, in much the same way that Symeon the New Theologian had on his own for a different end: to justify his mystical teachings.

The thrust of my argument is plain: in the course of the eleventh century there was a monastic revival that built on Symeon’s reputation. It emphasized the ideal of the spiritual father as a guide to a Christian society. It stressed the importance of individual experience and personal relations. To this ideal Michael Psellos opposed the qualifications of the “philosopher.” Again the emphasis was on individual experience and personal relations. The focus on the qualities of mystic and “philosopher” as a guide to human behavior invited autobiographical detail.

But why should this shift have happened in the eleventh century rather than at any other time? I have already pointed to one set of reasons: the greater value accorded to the individual, self-awareness, and personal relationships. But this was connected with a more critical appraisal of the imperial ideal: as the *raison d’être* of a Christian society it was increasingly seen to be inadequate. Emperors did not measure up to the exact-

⁶¹L. Brehier, “Un discours inédit de Psellos,” *REG* 16 (1903), 375–416; *REG* 17 (1904), 35–76.

⁶²See M. J. Angold, “Imperial Renewal and Orthodox Reaction: Byzantium in the Eleventh Century,” in *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries*, ed. P. Magdalino (Aldershot, 1994), 231–46; Angold, *Church and Society*, 31–35. See also J. M. Hussey, *Ascetics and Humanists in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (London, 1960), who prefers to play down the differences between humanists and ascetics and to minimize the tensions. She is correct to the extent that most sought to find ways of reconciling the differences through the usual compromises and incomprehension. This even applies on occasion to Psellos himself: see Michael Psellos, *Scripta minora*, II, ed. Kurtz and Drexler, no. 36. It does not mean that differences did not exist nor that there was no debate.

⁶³Sathas, *MB*, V, 509.23–24.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 450.5–6.

ing responsibilities of office. They lacked the necessary personal qualities and the sheer ability. This was a major theme of Psellos in the *Chronographia*. It drew a response from his former charge, Emperor Michael VII Doukas (1071–78),⁶⁵ which took the shape of an autobiography. When the emperor learned that his old tutor had plans for a history of his reign, he provided him with an account of his life. Psellos had expected something bombastic. Instead he received more of a confession, notable for its humility and self-criticism. This is the first overt autobiography recorded in a medieval Byzantine context. It has not survived, but we may surmise that it contained an apology for his conduct of the imperial office directed against the strictures of Michael Psellos. Michael VII's autobiography accords very well with the advice he received from Kekaumenos.⁶⁶ It will be remembered that he urged the emperor to acquire a "philosopher"—in the manner of Emperor Augustus—who would oversee his moral and spiritual welfare. "Philosopher" was a title to which both a humanist, such as Michael Psellos, and a spiritual guide, such as Symeon the New Theologian, could lay claim.⁶⁷

The autobiographical impulse therefore owed something to these competing ideals. Both humanist and monastic mentor cultivated their rational faculties: the former to guide emperors and to act as an arbiter of Christian society; the latter to provide spiritual guidance and to intercede with God. Their power was no longer anonymous. It was also more subjective. The mystical teachings of Symeon the New Theologian brought sanctification within human grasp. Equally the cultivation of the mind emphasized human potential. Both humanist and monastic teacher put a new stress on personal experience, which in its turn pointed to autobiography.

The humanist and the monastic sage were not the only idealized figures who enjoyed special prominence at this time: the aristocrat was another. Here again there were competing ideals. The claims of birth challenged those of merit. Michael Psellos hailed Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos for rejecting birth as a necessary qualification for high office.⁶⁸ Kekaumenos' diffidence may owe something to his failure to claim aristocratic status. He was caught between the ideals of service, loyalty, and merit and his duties to his family. Bishops too were beginning to make more elaborate claims for their

⁶⁵ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, vii, xi: ed. Renauld, II, 177–78; trans. Sewter, 373.

⁶⁶ See note 33.

⁶⁷ Michael Psellos describes the situation very well: "By philosopher I mean not those who have investigated the essences of beings nor those who have sought the principles of the cosmos and have neglected the principles of their own salvation, but those who have contempt for the world and have lived with the transcendents." (Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, IV, xxxiv, 4–7: ed. Renauld, I, 73; trans. Sewter, 106–7. Cf. F. Dölger, *Byzanz und die europäische Staatenwelt* [Ettal, 1953], 197–208.) The use of the term "humanist" has scarcely been debated by Byzantinists in contrast to western medievalists. For R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), 60, "humanism" seems a legitimate term to use in a medieval context. It means little more than the study of the classics and the wisdom derived therefrom. Other medievalists argue that the terms "humanist" and "humanism" do not appear until the Renaissance and that consequently they cannot be employed for an earlier period (e.g., J. Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance: The Origins of Intellectual and Artistic Change before the Reformation* [London-New York, 1990], 10–22). The Byzantines certainly had no word for "humanist." However, their use of "philosopher" in the sense of scholar rather than monk is more or less identical with "humanist" as employed in a Renaissance context. Overuse of the term "philosopher" becomes tiresome. On humanism in Byzantium, see H. Hunger, *Reich der neuen Mitte: Der christliche Geist der byzantinischen Kultur* (Graz-Vienna-Cologne, 1965), 355–69; J. Verpeaux, *Nicéphore Choumnos* (Paris, 1959), 171–201.

⁶⁸ Sathas, *MB*, IV, 430–31.

authority. The role of the bishop was increasingly idealized with the greater stress on pastoral responsibilities evident from the late eleventh century.⁶⁹ Autobiography, in one form or another, often disguised or oblique, provided a means whereby such figures could assert their claims to social prominence or apologize for their failure to live up to an ideal.

IV

Psellos gave the humanist ideal in Byzantium clearer definition. He did this very largely through self-promotion, which necessarily meant dwelling on his own experience. This took autobiographical form, even if he never progressed beyond the stage of autobiography in disguise. This failure may well have stemmed from a failure to find a specific literary form that would both serve as a vehicle of the humanist ideal and do justice to his sense of self-importance. At a later date the prologue to the edition of a humanist's collected works would come to serve a biographical and autobiographical purpose. We know that one of Psellos' patrons made an edition of some of his letters, but it has not survived.⁷⁰ Psellos' works have come down to us in some disorder. His *Chronographia* remained unfinished, reinforcing the suspicion that Psellos died unexpectedly in 1078.⁷¹ It may be the case that a premature death deprived him of the opportunity to review the meaning of his life.

The first such prologue that has survived we owe to Nikephoros Basilakes,⁷² a humanist prominent in the affairs of the patriarchate in the mid-twelfth century. He held a so-called professorial chair at Hagia Sophia. He was involved in one of the many dogmatic disputes of the Comnenian period, found himself on the wrong side, and was exiled. In the course of this dispute he collected various of his occasional pieces, encouraged, he claimed, by friends and supporters, and prefaced his work with a brief autobiography.⁷³ There are striking similarities with the autobiography prefacing a monastic rule. The foundation of a monastery was one path to immortality, an edition of collected works another.

Basilakes' autobiography would have delighted his supporters. It is one of the few pieces of Byzantine literature that can be appreciated even today for its wit. He starts with a quotation from the Wisdom of Solomon: "Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh" [Eccles. 12:12].⁷⁴ This opens the way for a display of self-deprecating humor and of acquaintance with the classics. He quotes Mar-

⁶⁹C. Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church* (London, 1982), 111–15, 214–21, 237–49; Angold, *Church and Society*, 139–57.

⁷⁰I.e., the Caesar John Doukas: Michael Psellos, *Scripta minora*, II, no. 256, 303–4; Michael Psellos, *De Operatione Daemonum*, ed. J. F. Boissonade (Nuremberg, 1838; repr. Amsterdam, 1964), 176.1–2. Cf. Ljubarskij, *Mikhail Psell*, 36–39, 69–74.

⁷¹P. Gautier, "Monodie inédite de Michel Psellos sur le basileus Andronic Ducas," *REB* 24 (1966), 159–64. For a different view, see Kazhdan, *Byzantine Literature*, 53–55; Ljubarskij, *Mikhail Psell*, 32–35.

⁷²A. Garzya, "Un letteré du milieu du XIIe siècle: Nicéphore Basilakes," *RESEE* 8 (1970), 611–21 (= A. Garzya, *Storia e interpretazione di testi bizantini* [London, 1974], no. VIII). See Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 876–90.

⁷³A. Garzya, "Il Prologo di Niceforo Basilace," *Bollettino del comitato per la preparazione dell'edizione nazionale dei classici greci e latini*, n.s., 19 (1971), 55–71 (= Garzya, *Storia e interpretazione*, no. XI).

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 56.1.

cus Aurelius: "Forget your thirst for books, lest you die belly-aching."⁷⁵ Having nodded in the direction of proper humility he then embarks on a triumphal presentation of his success as both a pupil and a teacher. He lists his writings, notes the envy they produced among his rivals, but apologizes for the paucity of the offerings now on display. He explains that he never sought friends or patrons; that he was the harshest of critics of his own work. For that reason he saw no point in publishing them, but locked them away where the damp had got at them. In any case, he had burned much of his juvenilia, when he was converted to the study of Christian wisdom.⁷⁶ This brought him preferment and a professorial chair. His exposition of the Scriptures brought him immense acclaim. He was like "a nightingale encompassing the great meadow of the church."⁷⁷ His popularity was not to the liking of the patriarch of the day. On one occasion his lecture went on so long that the patriarch was late for his supper. The patriarch sent him a regulation commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, suggesting that he be guided by this and that in future he submit his lectures for patriarchal approval. Basilakes did so, but got around this attempt at censorship by extemporizing.⁷⁸ It was the kind of triumph that academics have always relished.

There is a polemical flavor to this autobiography, as though Basilakes is using it to score points off his opponents. At one point he insists that he is not like the apes who shower excessive love on their offspring.⁷⁹ His readers would have understood the reference, which was to Aesop. Apes were supposed to cosset one of their offspring and neglect the other.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, it was the former that almost always died. The meaning was clear: Basilakes' works would survive; those of his opponents would not. Making a selection of his rhetorical works gave Basilakes an opportunity to review his life. The main-spring was a pride in his rhetorical skills and academic triumphs, in other words that he had lived up to the ideal of the humanist. The setting was the infighting of the patriarchal church. With the emergence in the twelfth century of the patriarchal *didaskaloi* the church of Hagia Sophia increasingly became the arena in which humanists proved themselves.

The other important humanist autobiography was the work of Patriarch Gregory of Cyprus (1283–89).⁸¹ It too took the form of a prologue to a collected edition of his writings. Unlike that of Basilakes, it was not inspired by polemic or apology, but was more a meditation on the humanist ideal. The autobiographical details concentrate on his education and intellectual development. Gregory interpreted his burning desire for a classical Greek education as a spiritual energy that defined the purpose of his life and provided

⁷⁵ Ibid., 56.27–29.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 57–60.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.177–78.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 61.184–210.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 60.152–54. Basilakes nicknames his chief enemy Bagoas, who should probably be identified with a deacon of Hagia Sophia named Basil. See Angold, *Church and Society*, 80 n. 38.

⁸⁰ B. E. Perry, *Aesopica* (Urbana, Ill., 1952), 406, no. 218.

⁸¹ W. Lameere, *La tradition manuscrite de la correspondance de Grégoire de Chypre patriarche de Constantinople (1283–1289)* (Brussels-Rome, 1937), 176–91. See Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 890–903; A. Garzya, "Observations sur l'Autobiographie de Grégoire de Chypre," *Πρακτικά τοῦ πρώτου διεθνoῦς κυπρολογικοῦ συνεδρίου* (Nicosia, 1972), II, 33–36 (= Garzya, *Storia e interpretazione*, no. XIII); C. N. Constantinides, *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries (1204–ca. 1310)* (Nicosia, 1982), 31–49.

him with the means to overcome the many obstacles he met. The objective was the *vita contemplativa*, but understood not in a monastic, but in a Hellenic, sense. The classical influence is apparent in his decision to write his autobiography in the third person, until at the very end he switches into the first person to deny that he is a fit person to judge Gregory's style and literary achievement!⁸²

In his autobiography he presents his life as one inspired by the desire to recover the Hellenic ideal. He only once refers to God and then in a neutral context. Unlike Basilakes he has nothing to say about his theological studies. He omits to mention that he became a monk and founded a monastery. He does admit to having become patriarch, but this only brought him cares and anxiety and denied him the leisure to devote himself to his studies or to live in a manner befitting "a philosopher—let alone a free man."⁸³ The patriarchate brought Gregory a sea of troubles, and he resigned the throne in relief in 1289. A life of study was to be his compensation.

V

Gregory also founded a monastery. In the normal course of events he would have provided it with a rule, prefaced by a short autobiographical sketch. The preface to a monastic rule became the preferred vehicle of autobiography in Byzantium. For laity and clergy alike, the foundation of a monastery gave meaning and purpose to life. There is, however, a contrast between the autobiographies of the laity and the clergy. The former normally wished to supply an apology, or at least an explanation, for their lives, while the latter were more concerned with their reputation for sanctity.

There is a strong note of self-justification in the earliest of these lay autobiographies, the work of Michael Attaleiates,⁸⁴ a successful bureaucrat who is best known for his history of Byzantium covering the mid- to late eleventh century. He founded a charitable house attached to a monastery at Constantinople. He let it be known in the autobiographical preface that his foundation was a thanks-offering to God for the favor He had shown him.⁸⁵ Coming from humble provincial origins, he had risen to a position of respectable eminence. His account of his life concentrates on his education, marriages, and the landed property he acquired.⁸⁶ He is at pains to emphasize the legality of his deals, even citing legal documents. He was in fact using the foundation in order to create a family trust, which would enjoy the tax privileges accorded to a pious foundation. It was a tax dodge. He devoted much of his rule to the legal rights exercised over the foundation by his heirs. He had it written into the rule that any case involving the property tied up in the monastery was to go before the prefect of the city, who would not only have his own name commemorated in the prayers of the monastery but receive an annual retainer.⁸⁷ Like the good civil servant he was, Attaleiates envisaged recruiting the monks

⁸² Lameere, *Correspondance*, 191.4–6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 187.19–29.

⁸⁴ P. Gautier, "La *diataxis* de Michel Attaliat," *REB* 39 (1981), 5–143; autobiographical introduction, 16–31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 23–29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 16–24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

for his foundation from former civil servants, men who would be efficient administrators of the foundation's wealth.⁸⁸

Attaleiates was recreating Byzantine bureaucracy in a monastic setting. His counterpart on the military side was the Georgian Gregory Pakourianos, Alexios I Komnenos' first grand domestic or commander-in-chief, who founded a monastery in Thrace. In keeping with his calling, Pakourianos used it to settle—far from their homeland—the remnants of his warband, but now as monks. He provided them with a rule⁸⁹ prefaced by an autobiography that is mostly an account of the sufferings of himself and his retainers in the service of the Byzantine Empire. Few of them had died a natural death, “for all have shed their blood through the sword and hand of the enemies of the Holy Cross and Byzantium [Romania].”⁹⁰ These included his brother Aspasios. There is a long, moving description of how Gregory reburied him in the grave he had set aside for himself in the monastery.⁹¹ The monastery was to serve as their memorial. Pakourianos used the autobiographical preface to his *typikon* to celebrate his role now and in the hereafter as the leader of a warband.

Attaleiates was a parvenu; Pakourianos, a foreigner who retained a healthy suspicion of Greeks.⁹² Both associate autobiographical detail and the foundation of a monastery with success, as a bureaucrat or as a military commander. In their different ways they were both laying claim to aristocratic status, which was still ill-defined in the late eleventh century. Merit challenged the claims of birth for much of that century. This changed with the accession to power of the Komnenoi. Henceforth, aristocracy came increasingly to be identified with the new dynasty.⁹³ The Komnenoi were great founders of monasteries, which they supplied with rules, but they were strangely reticent about supplying autobiographical details, even though the opportunity was there. Empress Eirene Doukaina had a rule drawn up for her foundation of the Theotokos Kecharitomene. It was adapted from that of the Theotokos Evergetis.⁹⁴ She provides few if any details of her life. This was equally true of her sons. John II Komnenos (1118–43) has almost nothing to say about his life in the rule he gave his foundation of the Pantokrator,⁹⁵ nor did his brother Isaac Komnenos in that for the monastery of the Kosmosoteira in Thrace.⁹⁶ Isaac preferred to dwell on the state of mind that induced him to found the monastery: he had fallen into the pit of unbelief, but had been rescued. The foundation of a monastery was a thanks-offering.⁹⁷ The absence of autobiographical detail is striking and is best explained by the sense that he was a sinner, which pervades the whole document. He for-

⁸⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁸⁹ P. Gautier, “Le *typikon* du sèbaste Grégoire Pakourianos,” *REB* 42 (1984), 5–145; autobiographical introduction, 18–35.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 34–35.

⁹¹ Ibid., 41.378–80.

⁹² Ibid., 104–5.

⁹³ See now P. Magdalino, “Innovations in Government,” in *Alexios I Komnenos*, ed. M. Mullett and D. Smythe (Belfast, 1996), 146–66.

⁹⁴ P. Gautier, “Le *typikon* de la Théotokos Kecharitôméné,” *REB* 43 (1985), 5–165. It begins (pp. 18–29) with an invocation to the Mother of God, which serves instead of any autobiographical introduction.

⁹⁵ P. Gautier, “Le *typikon* du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator,” *REB* 32 (1974), 1–145. It begins (pp. 26–30) with an invocation to the Pantokrator.

⁹⁶ L. Petit, “*Typikon* du monastère de la Kosmosotira près d'Aenos,” *IRAIK* 13 (1908), 17–77.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 20.18–30.

bade the monks to have a portrait of him made, for he considered that this would somehow be destructive of his spiritual well-being.⁹⁸

How to explain the reticence of Eirene Doukaina and her sons? It may be that they were constrained by the Evergetine tradition with its contempt for the world and its stress on state of mind. It may therefore have been a reflection of Comnenian piety.⁹⁹ It is more than possible that members of the imperial dynasties of Doukas and Komnenos did not feel any need to justify or vaunt their social and political ascendancy.

This did not apply with the same weight to the series of aristocratic families that emerged from under the Comnenian umbrella in the course of the twelfth century, families such as Palaiologos and Cantacuzene. Members of these families would in due course seize the imperial throne, Michael Palaiologos in 1259 and John Cantacuzene in 1341. Both usurpers wrote autobiographies, it is true, of very different kinds. Both autobiographies were informed by the need to justify the act of usurpation. Cantacuzene's autobiography comes in the form of memoirs and will be considered later.¹⁰⁰ Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–82) left two autobiographies, one rather more substantial than the other.¹⁰¹ They took the now traditional form of prefaces to monastic rules: the first to the rule he gave to the monastery of St. Demetrios in Constantinople, which he refounded; the second that to the monastery of St. Michael the Archangel on Mount Auxentios, which he restored. Both were written at the very end of his reign, when the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 seemed to have justified his life's work. He claimed he was writing not in praise of himself, but to the glory of God. He presented his achievements as evidence of the favor of God and of his patron saints, the Archangel Michael and St. Demetrios. He ends his rule for the monastery of the Archangel Michael with the hope that he will be duly rewarded for his struggles on behalf of Byzantium, and he sets out in detail what he considers these to be. He then reminds the patriarchs of Constantinople that it was only thanks to his recovery of the Queen of Cities that they were no longer contemptuously referred to as patriarchs of Nicaea or patriarchs of the Bithynian eparchy.¹⁰²

There is a strong note of apology in Michael Palaiologos' autobiographies. He insisted that he had been raised to the imperial dignity, not through force or a glib tongue—which were the charges against him—but “it was Your right hand, Lord, which gave me strength, . . . not persuading, nor adducing necessity, but being persuaded and coerced.”¹⁰³ He presented himself as the agent of divine providence. But underlying his justification for his seizure of the imperial throne and his actions as emperor was something else: a strong sense of family and family responsibility. He claimed that the honor of the family had passed down to him, growing all the time. His forebears were not content with earthly rewards, but served God, whence their honors and position at court. They were distinguished for their wealth and military prowess, but they were also patrons

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.27–30, 64.33–34.

⁹⁹ Alexios I Komnenos' *Mousai* (ed. P. Maas, “Die Musen des Kaisers Alexios I.,” *BZ* 22 [1913], 348–69) provide an insight into Comnenian piety with their emphasis on humility, virtue, and the last judgment. Cf. Angold, *Church and Society*, 69–72, 273–76.

¹⁰⁰ See A. Kazhdan, “L'Histoire de Cantacuzène en tant qu'oeuvre littéraire,” *Byzantion* 50 (1980), 279–335.

¹⁰¹ H. Grégoire, “Imperatoris Michaelis Palaeologi de Vita sua,” *Byzantion* 29–30 (1959–60), 447–76; A. A. Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei*, I.i (Kiev, 1895), 769–94.

¹⁰² Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie*, 789–93.

¹⁰³ Grégoire, “Vita,” 453–56.

of monasteries and benefactors of the poor and defenseless.¹⁰⁴ Both monasteries were family monasteries. Michael Palaiologos recalled that the monastery of St. Demetrios, the family's patron saint, had been founded by his ancestor George Palaiologos,¹⁰⁵ while the monastery of the Archangel Michael was restored by his grandfather Alexios Palaiologos.¹⁰⁶ Michael Palaiologos' autobiographies were not only an apology for usurpation, but also a vindication of the aristocratic ideal in Byzantium.

VI

The autobiographical preface to a monastic rule was the preferred form of autobiography in Byzantium. Given the place that the monastery held in Byzantine life, this is perfectly understandable. For laity and monks alike it was the focus of spiritual life and posthumous hope. For the laity the foundation of a monastery was often a thank-offering for a successful career or designed to serve as a family memorial. The significance of a life would be embodied in a monastery. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, this could be reduced to a few lines, or at best pages, of autobiography. Only for saints and would-be saints was there much more to be said.

The autobiographies of monks who founded or restored monasteries have two leit-motifs: the spiritual journey of the founder as a guide to the community and the practical steps taken to found the monastery. On occasion, the first might be dispensed with. Neilos, the organizer of the monastery of Our Lady Machairas on the island of Cyprus, was a practical man. He provides a brief history of the monastery and how he came to be chosen abbot. His practical ability had saved the monastery during a period of famine. As abbot he records his building activities and how he brought difficult countryside under cultivation.¹⁰⁷ He itemizes the imperial privileges he obtained to protect the monastery. He allows a personal note to creep in: he built himself a chapel dedicated to John the Baptist near a cell with a few trees and gently flowing water. Had his administrative responsibilities allowed he would have liked to retire there to lead the life of a hesychast.¹⁰⁸

St. Christodoulos, the founder of the monastery of St. John the Theologian on the island of Patmos, has more to say about his life in his autobiographical preface to his rule.¹⁰⁹ He saw himself as a monastic reformer. In his autobiography he dwells on his early experiences. He had run away from home while still a child in search of Christ. He had ended up in Palestine where he had moved from monastery to monastery. Finally, the Saracens were too much for him, and he returned to Asia Minor and settled on Mount Latros, where he followed and may have introduced the lavriot pattern of monastic life. Turkish raids forced him yet again to move on.¹¹⁰ He visited Constantinople in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 449–52.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 464–68.

¹⁰⁶ Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie*, 772.

¹⁰⁷ I. P. Tsiknopoullos, *Κυπριακὰ τυπικά* (Nicosia, 1969), 9–15.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 58.16–26.

¹⁰⁹ MM, VI, 59–90; autobiographical introduction, 60–69. The term used for Christodoulos' rule is *hypotyposis* rather than the more usual *typikon*. Christodoulos' will (ibid., 81–85) contains some additional information. See E. L. Vranouse, *Τὰ ἀγιολογικά κείμενα τοῦ ὁσίου Χριστοδοῦλου, ἱδρυτοῦ τῆς ἐν Πάτμῳ μονῆς* (Athens, 1966), 87–139; Morris, *Monks and Laymen*, 47–50.

¹¹⁰ MM, VI, 60–61.

the hope of obtaining support from Emperor Alexios I Komnenos.¹¹¹ The emperor must have found his kind of monasticism rather old-fashioned compared with the new currents associated with the monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis, which stressed the primacy of confession. Christodoulos paid little attention to the spiritual benefits of confession. His autobiography was therefore not only a statement of his fitness to be the founder of a new monastery, but also a defense of the lavriot ideal, as he had practiced it on Mount Latros. Quite unhistorically, he believed that Mount Latros had originally been colonized by monks from Sinai and Raithou.¹¹² This gave the ideal the respectability of ancient usage. Christodoulos remembered how they all used to gather together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist and would then disperse to their hermitages, spending the rest of the week engaged in singing the psalms and in handicrafts. The bulk of his autobiography is devoted to the foundation of his monastery on the island of Patmos and the obstacles that he faced and overcame. The foundation was his ultimate purpose in life. The autobiography enshrined his experience and wisdom and was to serve as a guide and an inspiration to the community. His autobiography is on a much larger scale than that of Athanasios the Athonite, but it conformed to the pattern of a monastic leader upholding his ideal of monasticism. Christodoulos would in due course be recognized as a saint, but there is no suggestion in his writings that he had any intention of promoting his own cult.

This is in contrast to St. Neophytos, the twelfth-century Cypriot saint, who is the subject of an excellent recent study by C. Galatariotou.¹¹³ He too has left an autobiographical preface to his monastic rule.¹¹⁴ The theme is how he was chosen by God. From early on he was troubled by the flux of life. He could see no point to worldly success, for only death and another world awaited him. These thoughts, he insisted, were not prompted by his youth or by his lack of education, but by divine grace and providence. This was the start of his conversion to a monastic way of life. "If some poor beggar or wandering monk came to my father's house, begging bread, I thought his way of life enviable and blessed, and, if it had been within my powers, I would cheerfully have embraced it."¹¹⁵ None of his family knew of his preoccupations, but when faced with marriage, he ran away to a monastery. Brought back to face up to life's responsibilities, he ran away again, this time for good. He was bitter about the fact that he had never received any schooling from his parents. It meant that he was sent off by the abbot of the monastery to tend the vineyards—something for which his peasant background fitted him. This went on for five years, but somehow he learned to read and write and was allowed a position in the monastery. He was inordinately proud of his literacy¹¹⁶ and became a prolific author.

Of these short autobiographies, his is the one that has to a modern ear the greatest

¹¹¹ Ibid., 64–65.

¹¹² Ibid., 60; cf. Morris, *Monks and Laymen*, 48–49.

¹¹³ C. Galatariotou, *The Making of a Saint: The Life, Times and Sanctification of Neophytos the Recluse* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹¹⁴ Tsiknopoullos, *Κυπριακά τυπικά*, 73–81.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 74–75.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 75–76.

literary merit. There is a freshness that is usually missing from Byzantine texts where such a high premium was placed on conventionality. He includes in his monastic rule a list of his writings. He believed that his works were proof of his quest for sanctity. His sermons contain passages where he claims that his writings are scarcely his own but are divinely inspired. He liked to think of himself as God's instrument.¹¹⁷ In his autobiography he presents his life as an inspired search for the form of monastic life that would enable him to fulfill God's purpose for him. He is guided by visions and voices, which he recounts. Once he had a vision that he was ascending Mount Olympos in Cyprus so that he could worship the Holy Cross. He dedicated to the Holy Cross the cave church where he eventually settled.¹¹⁸

Neophytos originally drew up his rule with the autobiography in 1189, but toward the end of his life made some additions to the rule to take into account his monastery's new circumstances. These were connected with the way it had become a refuge for the Greek population faced with Frankish rule.¹¹⁹ He did not take this opportunity, however, to make additions to his autobiographical preface, for the main purpose of his life had been fulfilled with the foundation of his monastery.

Neophytos supplemented his original autobiography with other autobiographical writings, the most important of which was an account of a miracle that had saved him. He had decided that his original cave dwelling was becoming too easy of access. He recounts what happened to him, not once but several times, on the feast of the Elevation of the Cross, which was of particular significance to his church. So many people pressed into the tiny church that he somehow got overlooked. There was not even any food for him. All he asked for was ten beans soaked in water. To get away from people he started to excavate new quarters above the cave church. He was now over sixty and was bringing the work to a conclusion, when he realized he had forgotten to make provision for a privy. He set to, but there was a rock fall and he was trapped by a monstrous boulder for several days. He emerged unscathed and presented this as the miracle that pointed to his special choice by God. It was the kind of piece that one would expect from a hagiographer and would normally have been part of the unofficial process of canonization that prevailed in Byzantium. Neophytos ensured that this event would not be forgotten and composed a special prayer of thanksgiving. His brother John, abbot of Koutsoventis, turned this into a liturgical commemoration, celebrated every January 24.¹²⁰ No Life of St. Neophytos was ever composed. The preface to his rule was hagiography enough.

The self-promotion of the autobiography went hand in hand with Neophytos' use of the image. He made sure that his portrait was present in the decoration of his cave church. One showed him as a suppliant in a Deesis; another had him being carried to heaven by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Even more suggestive of his immortal longings is the dome of the cave church with its depiction of the Ascension. At its center was the entrance into Neophytos' new apartment. To attend the liturgy all he had to do

¹¹⁷Galatariotou, *Neophytos*, 97–128.

¹¹⁸Tsiknopoullos, *Κυπριακά τυπικά*, 77–78.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 80–81.

¹²⁰Galatariotou, *Neophytos*, 110–13. See G. K. Christodoulou, "Un canon inédit sur la Théosémie de Néophyte le reclus par son frère, Jean le Chrysostomite," *REB* 55 (1997), 247–59.

was to poke his head over the edge of this entrance. He would therefore appear in the midst of the Ascension—a living icon.¹²¹ Neophytos' use of art echoes his use of autobiography which spills over into autohagiography.¹²² It was, in many ways, a logical development of the autobiography of the inspired monastic teacher.

VII

Neophytos' writings anticipated the autobiographies of Nikephoros Blemmydes, the most famous scholar of the period of exile after 1204.¹²³ He twice turned down, or so he says, offers of the patriarchal throne. He was the representative of the orthodox church on two occasions in discussions over the union of churches with the Latins. He was the abbot of one monastery and the founder of another, but this is not the explanation behind his need to write not one, but two autobiographies.

They were more in the nature of spiritual testaments originally delivered to the monks of his foundation, the monastery of the Lord Christ Who Is, to celebrate Blemmydes' reaching his sixty-sixth year. Sixty-six was traditionally the age when the pious took stock of their lives and drew up their wills. This invited the testator to dwell on his spiritual condition.¹²⁴ Wills remained primarily legal documents, but increasingly affected a confessional element with appropriate autobiographical details. They had much in common with the autobiographical preface to a monastic *typikon*.¹²⁵ Blemmydes' autobiographies owed something to both, but were neither a will nor part of any monastic rule. Blemmydes did draw up a monastic rule, but it has survived only in fragmentary form. There is no autobiographical preface. In another respect, too, his monastic rule does not conform to the normal pattern. At least two, and possibly three of the chapters of his rule (only four survive) consist of treatises that Blemmydes composed at various intervals.¹²⁶ Like the autobiographies, they are most likely to have first seen the light of day as sermons delivered before his community. We might conclude that Blemmydes

¹²¹ Galatariotou, *Neophytos*, 128–46.

¹²² Cf. J. A. Munitiz, "Hagiographical Autobiography in the 13th Century," *BSI* 53 (1992), 243–49; J. A. Munitiz, "Self-Canonisation: The 'Partial Account' of Nikephoros Blemmydes," in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel (London, 1981), 164–68.

¹²³ Nicephorus Blemmydes, *Autobiographia sive curriculum vitae necnon epistula universalior*, ed. J. A. Munitiz, CCSG 13 (Brepols-Turnhout, 1984); Nikephoros Blemmydes, *A Partial Account*, trans. J. A. Munitiz (Louvain, 1988). See Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 831–75; I. Ševčenko, "Blemmydès et ses Autobiographies," in *La civiltà bizantina dal XII al XV secolo* (Rome, 1982), 116–37; P. A. Agapetos, "Ο λογοτεχνικός θάνατος τῶν ἐχθρῶν στήν 'Αυτοβιογραφία' τοῦ Νικηφόρου Βλεμμύδη," *Hellenika* 48 (1998), 29–46.

¹²⁴ Blemmydes, I, i, 1: ed. Munitiz, 1.1–4; trans. Munitiz, 43. Cf. *The Correspondence of Leo, Metropolitan of Synada and Syncellus*, ed. M. P. Vinson, DOT 8 (Washington, D.C., 1985), 48–52.

¹²⁵ Most wills containing significant autobiographical information were monastic in origin. Three abbots of Patmos have left wills in which they give an account of their stewardship: Sabas [n.d.]; Theoktistos (Sept. 1157); Germanos (Dec. 1272): MM, VI, 106–8, 229–33, 241–46. This was the practice in other monasteries: e.g., the will of Abbot Neophytos of Docheiariou: *Actes de Docheiariou*, ed. N. Oikonomidès, Archives de l'Athos 12 (Paris, 1984), no. 6, 91–97. Monastic wills might serve as *typika*, e.g., that of Maximos, founder of the monastery of Skoteine near Philadelphia: S. Eustratiades in *Hellenika* 3 (1930), 325–39. See Manaphes, Τυπικά, 145–73. Wills with autobiographical preambles were not a monastic monopoly, but were also drawn up by the laity. One of the earliest surviving such wills was the work of Eustathios Boilas: see P. Lemerle, "Le testament d'Eustathios Boilas (Avril 1059)," in *Cinq études sur le XIe siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), 20–29.

¹²⁶ Nicephorus Blemmydes, *Curriculum vitae et carmina*, ed. A. Heisenberg (Leipzig, 1896); J. A. Munitiz, "A Missing Chapter from the *Typikon* of Nikephoros Blemmydes," *REB* 44 (1986), 199–207.

never finished drawing up his rule and that the surviving portions were rather materials for a rule.¹²⁷ In any case, we seem to be very close to the origins of the autobiographies that preface monastic rules, in longer treatises for the benefit and edification of the community, along the lines of Symeon the New Theologian's disguised autobiography.

Blemmydes was able to fuse different forms of monastic documentation—wills, *typika*, and sermons—and create a literary vehicle for full-scale autobiography. It is entitled “a partial narrative” (*Diegesis merike*). The narrative was the simplest literary form that Byzantines had at their disposal. It was organized on a strictly chronological basis, which aligns it with hagiography rather than encomiastic or other rhetorical forms of Byzantine literature. The emphasis on the miraculous and divine intervention is equally hagiographical. The artlessness of the literary form belies Blemmydes' originality. His ambitions are revealed by a literary style that is highly rhetorical. His deliberate choice of a high-level style reveals that in their final form he was aiming his autobiographies not only toward his monastic community, but also toward the educated elite that dominated church and state. It also reveals that Blemmydes hoped they would be an enduring monument. They were not occasional pieces, but designed to preserve his memory.

The material and the themes of his two autobiographies are not obviously different, but they scarcely overlap. The first was delivered in May 1264 and the second in April 1265. Blemmydes seems to have conceived them from the outset as a complementary pair, which would form “a harmonious whole, a body complete with members.”¹²⁸ As he says in the introduction to his second autobiography, “I shall deal in particular with things that I hesitated to explain in my previous composition, as I was afraid it would become too long.”¹²⁹ They deal with different aspects of his life and display a difference of emphasis and selection. The first autobiography traces the path that led him to the monastic life and its consequences; the second, his career as a scholar and a theologian. They are united by his quest for self-perfection.¹³⁰

The first is built around the key episode of his life, his conversion to a monastic vocation. He liked to think that it brought him into contempt, that it set against him the world of the court that he had abandoned. He became “the butt and laughing stock of haughty people,”¹³¹ but God never abandoned him. The first autobiography is full of people who wanted to murder Blemmydes, but on each occasion he was saved by a miracle. A sword stuck in a scabbard,¹³² or a sword seemed to pass right through Blemmydes without causing any harm.¹³³ His enemies died in suspicious circumstances, one from winding a caul around his head,¹³⁴ another from sheer panic.¹³⁵ Yet another found him-

¹²⁷A marginal note from Oxon. Bodl.: Holkham graecus 71, fol. 205v, lends some support to this view in the sense that it lumps together discourses, some taken from the *typikon*, others apparently not, the two autobiographies, and the *epistola universalior*: see Blemmydes, ed. Munitiz, xiii; trans. Munitiz, 4–5.

¹²⁸Blemmydes, II, i, 2: ed. Munitiz, 47.4–7; trans. Munitiz, 95.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, II, i, 1: ed. Munitiz, 47.12–14; trans. Munitiz, 95.

¹³⁰I owe this to Joseph A. Munitiz. I am very grateful to him for reading a version of this paper and generously sharing his profound knowledge of Blemmydes' *Autobiographies*.

¹³¹Blemmydes, I, li, 90: ed. Munitiz, 44–45; trans. Munitiz, 94.

¹³²*Ibid.*, I, xli, 71: ed. Munitiz, 36.6–9; trans. Munitiz, 84.

¹³³*Ibid.*, I, xviii, 29: ed. Munitiz, 17.1–11; trans. Munitiz, 59.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, I, xxxi, 52: ed. Munitiz, 28.10–12; trans. Munitiz, 74.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, I, xxxii, 53: ed. Munitiz, 28–29; trans. Munitiz, 74.

self excommunicated.¹³⁶ Blemmydes was convinced that he was the object of miraculous intervention. There is a greater stress on the miraculous in the first autobiography than in the second, even though the first is more straightforward.

In his second autobiography, Blemmydes prefaces an account of his intellectual activities with an interpretation of the meaning of his childhood. He was convinced that his childhood actions proclaimed that he had been preordained to a life of sanctity. It showed in the way that as a baby he insisted on being suckled only by his mother. He never told a lie. His favorite game was playing at churches. He always pushed away motherly souls who wanted to embrace him. He concluded his account with the smug remark: "I hold these and similar incidents to be signs of God's affection and of the process by which goodness is engraved and impressed upon the soul."¹³⁷ He was a most unnatural son. Though their only surviving child, he refused to visit either his mother or his father as they lay dying. He justified this on the grounds that he was being true to the monastic ideal of forsaking all.¹³⁸ He was being true to his true father, God!

This introduction to his second autobiography served two purposes. It spelled out the message of the first autobiography and justified his intellectual pursuits as part of a divinely ordained pattern. He presents his oral examination at the end of his studies as a rite of passage. He relates how he outwitted his examiner thanks to the brilliance of his logic.¹³⁹ This episode led to his role as official spokesman for the orthodox church in the two sets of discussions with the Latins. He noted with satisfaction that he was initially called in because the original spokesman, who happened to be Blemmydes' luckless examiner,¹⁴⁰ did not have the intellectual caliber to stand up to the Latins. Blemmydes was also spokesman in talks with the Armenian church—another episode that he includes in his second autobiography. This is followed by a defense of the sermon on St. John the Divine he preached on his return.¹⁴¹

Even more significant is the account he provides of the foundation of his monastery of the Lord Christ Who Is, for this set a seal on his life.¹⁴² Not a word is said about this foundation in the first autobiography. This may at first sight seem strange, since it was addressed to the community; less strange, if it is remembered that the first autobiography concentrated on Blemmydes' tribulations and the second on his achievements. In the second autobiography he included, for instance, a list of his major works. They are mostly theological, but Blemmydes did not forget the *Mirror of Princes* that he composed for Theodore II Laskaris, the heir to the throne.¹⁴³ It was evidence of his moral authority.

The second autobiography could easily have served as the basis for a preface to a collection of Blemmydes' works, in the manner of a Nikephoros Basilakes or a Gregory

¹³⁶ Ibid., I, xxxii, 54: ed. Munitiz, 29.10–11; trans. Munitiz, 75.

¹³⁷ Ibid., II, iii, 5: ed. Munitiz, 48–49; trans. Munitiz, 96.

¹³⁸ Ibid., II, xviii, 42–43: ed. Munitiz, 64–65; trans. Munitiz, 115–16.

¹³⁹ Ibid., II, iv–viii, 8–15: ed. Munitiz, 50–53; trans. Munitiz, 98–103.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., II, xiii–xvii, 25–40: ed. Munitiz, 57–63; trans. Munitiz, 106–14.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., II, xxiv–xxvii, 61–73: ed. Munitiz, 73–79; trans. Munitiz, 125–32. Cf. J. A. Munitiz, "Blemmydes' *Encomium* on St. John the Evangelist (BHG 931)," *AB* 107 (1989), 285–346.

¹⁴² Blemmydes, II, xix–xx, 45–48: ed. Munitiz, 65–67; trans. Munitiz, 116–18.

¹⁴³ Ibid., II, xxviii, 75–76: ed. Munitiz, 79–80, trans. Munitiz, 132–34. Cf. H. Hunger and I. Ševčenko, *Des Nikephoros Blemmydes Βασιλικὴ Ἀνδρία und dessen Metaphrase von Georgios Galesiotes und Georgios Oinaïotes*, *WByzSt* 18 (Vienna, 1986).

of Cyprus. But by the end of his life Blemmydes had little sympathy with the humanist ideal, as Gregory found to his cost. Gregory had hoped to study with Blemmydes, but was dissuaded by his reputation for arrogance. It was this quality apparently, rather than any love for learning, that he passed on to his pupils.¹⁴⁴ It was a reputation difficult to reconcile with the “Hellenic” ideal that was Gregory’s inspiration.

Misch quite rightly detects beneath the surface of Blemmydes’ autobiographies an underlying tension between two contemplative ideals: the monastic and the “Hellenic.”¹⁴⁵ Blemmydes devotes the early chapters of his first autobiography not to his childhood, but to a detailed account of his education, which was largely “Hellenic.”¹⁴⁶ It fitted him for a position at court, but he dismissed this as a dream world.¹⁴⁷ He turned instead to a career in the church, which he found just as unsatisfactory. It involved him in sour professional rivalries and gave him no time to continue with his studies. This more than anything prompted his decision to abandon his career and turn to the monastic life, which would allow him more time with his books.¹⁴⁸ Once settled into the monastic life he continued to study the outer or “Hellenic” wisdom, even if he claims to have concentrated more on Christian authors.¹⁴⁹ He also gave instruction in “Hellenic” philosophy and science to pupils sent from the imperial court.¹⁵⁰ Blemmydes hoped to combine “Hellenic” and monastic elements in his contemplative life. Experience and what he took to be divine guidance showed him that this was impossible. It was at this point that he ended his first autobiography. There was much left to be explained, occasioned by his rejection of the “Hellenic” education that was his starting point.

His second autobiography supplies the answers. His starting point this time was his childhood. It revealed that God had chosen him specially. His “Hellenic” education is passed over in a few sentences, but its purpose was clear: it fitted him to defend orthodoxy. Scholarship and learning were irrelevant, except insofar as they laid the foundations for Blemmydes’ ability as a theologian. The message of the two autobiographies is clear: from childhood on, whether as a monk or as a theologian, he came under divine protection. With God’s aid Blemmydes came to understand that his divinely instituted task was to defend orthodoxy both intellectually and morally against its enemies. He was an instrument of the divine will.

As the only full-scale Byzantine autobiography, the two books of Blemmydes’ *Diegesis merike* warrant more attention than has been given them. They have not been hailed as a literary achievement of real significance. Even the most recent editor, J. Munitiz—who is more sympathetic and discerning than most—has his doubts about their lasting value,

¹⁴⁴ Lameere, *Correspondance*, 181.12–22.

¹⁴⁵ Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 836–37. This was a distinction recognized by Byzantines themselves, notably in the way they contrasted the “inner” and the “outer” learning. I use “Hellenic” to correspond to the “outer” learning and its assumptions and outlook. J. Munitiz refuses to accept the distinction made by Misch (“Hagiographical Autobiography,” 249). It is true that most educated Byzantines, including Blemmydes himself, aimed to reconcile both in their lives. Most succeeded by ignoring the contradictions this posed. But it was a problem for educated Byzantines, and the more perspicacious admitted it.

¹⁴⁶ Blemmydes, I, i–vi, 2–10: ed. Munitiz, 3–7; trans. Munitiz, 43–48.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I, iv, 6: ed. Munitiz, 5–6; trans. Munitiz, 45–46. Cf. *ibid.*, I, vii, 11: ed. Munitiz, 7–8; trans. Munitiz, 48.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I, xxii, 35: ed. Munitiz, 20.1–8; trans. Munitiz, 63.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, xxviii, 49: ed. Munitiz, 26.1–3; trans. Munitiz, 71.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, xxix, 49: ed. Munitiz, 26.4; trans. Munitiz, 71.

but he identifies the difficulties that a modern readership has with Blemmydes' autobiographies. He sees Blemmydes as a victim of "delusion of grandeur, albeit in its most insidious form of spiritual achievement." But he allows that he was also "very much a child of his age."¹⁵¹ The combination makes Blemmydes thoroughly unsympathetic in modern terms. I. Ševčenko dismisses his autobiographies as the outpourings of a neurotic.¹⁵² This does not take us very far, since by modern standards most Byzantine holy men were neurotic, and some certifiably so. There was a marked neurotic component to Byzantine culture and society. Nobody would wish to argue that Blemmydes was somehow the typical Byzantine, but the traits he revealed were Byzantine. As long as it is remembered that he took things to extremes, we can agree with Munitiz' conclusion: "It is through him that many of the ordinary reactions, fears and hopes of exiled Constantinopolitans can be felt: their trust in God's special protection, their murderous internecine rivalries, their petty ignorance of the path that history was taking, their superstitions, their physical sufferings, their love affairs, their stubborn cultural pride and their gradual realization of difficult tasks that would bear lasting fruit."¹⁵³ Blemmydes' autobiographies have gone unappreciated by modern scholars simply because it is so hard to come to terms with the Byzantine *psyche* for those, like Misch, who are impregnated with the classical ideal. He expressed disappointment that Blemmydes failed to deliver what he anticipated from him, "a self-contained narrative of an individual life that focuses on the core of the personality."¹⁵⁴ Misch attributed this apparent failure to the hagiographical imprint the autobiographies bore. In fact, Misch was more or less admitting that the personality revealed did not tally with his rigid standards. If the purpose of autobiography is to lay bare the core of a personality, then Blemmydes would appear to have succeeded. He stands revealed as stubborn, self-obsessed, self-righteous, vindictive, and overweening.

There are elements of self-justification—of paranoia, if you like—in Blemmydes' autobiographies, but they were also an advertisement of his saintly qualities. Why otherwise should Patriarch Joseph I (1266–75) have come from Constantinople in 1268 to Blemmydes' monastery near Ephesos? He came to seek Blemmydes' support in his struggle with the recently deposed Patriarch Arsenios. The historian George Pachymeres described Blemmydes on that occasion as "a disembodied intelligence." It was intended as a tribute to his saintliness. Blemmydes treated the patriarch with a hauteur that verged on contempt. This was in keeping with the tone of his autobiographies. He wished to emphasize his lofty neutrality. He was nevertheless willing to endorse the patriarch. The price he demanded was ratification of the independence of his monastery. The patriarch was in addition expected, on his return to Constantinople, to obtain imperial confirmation of the privilege he issued Blemmydes. The patriarch complied, but on Blemmydes' death rescinded the measure, to the glee of George Pachymeres.¹⁵⁵ Blemmydes' willingness to compromise with the patriarch lost him much respect in the church at large.

This compromise failed in its purpose, for the patriarch did not honor his undertaking. He instead took the opportunity of Blemmydes' death to subordinate his monastery

¹⁵¹ Ibid., trans. Munitiz, 42.

¹⁵² Ševčenko, "Blemmydès et ses Autobiographies," 119–23.

¹⁵³ Blemmydes, trans. Munitiz, 42.

¹⁵⁴ Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 836.

¹⁵⁵ George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. Failler, trans. V. Laurent (Paris, 1984), II, 437–41.

to the monastery of Galesios. This precluded the development of any cult devoted to Blemmydes, as there was now no independent community capable of preserving his reputation for sanctity. Without such a community his autobiographies lost their power as a statement of his claim to be an instrument of God. In any case, as R. Macrides has shown, canonization was becoming more systematic under the Palaiologoi, the essential element being patriarchal and synodal approval.¹⁵⁶ This Blemmydes had more or less forfeited through his high-handed but self-serving treatment of the patriarch. His autobiographies smacked of self-promotion, self-sanctification even. They would have produced unease, if not downright disapproval.

VIII

Blemmydes had created out of various elements a literary vehicle for full-scale autobiography. It was an impressive achievement, but blunted by the failure of others to exploit to the full the possibilities opened up by him. The spiritual testament continued to provide an opportunity for autobiography, but never on the scale essayed by Blemmydes. The exiled patriarch Arsenios left a testament that dates to soon after Blemmydes' death. It is not possible to establish any connection between this and Blemmydes' autobiographies, but it does fill a gap left by the latter. While hostile to Emperor Theodore II Laskaris, Blemmydes was careful to distance himself from Michael Palaiologos' usurpation. He achieved this by more or less ignoring it in his autobiographies. For Patriarch Arsenios this act of usurpation was the central fact of his life. His testament was a defense of his opposition to the usurper.¹⁵⁷

Isidore Boucheiras (1347–50) was another patriarch of Constantinople who left a testament with a strong autobiographical element. He was one of Gregory Palamas' most loyal adherents in the struggle with Barlaam and his supporters. This controversy was decided in favor of the Palamites by Emperor John VI Cantacuzene's victorious entry into Constantinople in 1347. Isidore's reward was the offer of the patriarchate. He tells us in his autobiography that he was reluctant to accept, but the Mother of God made up his mind for him. She appeared to him in a vision and indicated that he should accept the patriarchal throne. Isidore saw as his main task and achievement the suppression of anti-Palamite teachings. He has nothing but extravagant praise for Cantacuzene, who made this possible. He also recalled the emperor's generosity, which had rescued the patriarchate from poverty.¹⁵⁸

Yet another patriarch, Matthew I (1397–1410), also left a testament (*epiteleutios boulesis kai didaskalia*), dated 1407. It was addressed to the monks of the Constantinopolitan monastery of Charsianites, where he had been a monk and continued to be abbot. It is largely autobiographical, but his life is interwoven with the history of the monastery. There is a strong apologetic element, as the patriarch explains his role during Emperor Manuel II

¹⁵⁶ R. Macrides, "Saints and Sainthood in the Early Palaiologan Period," in *Byzantine Saint*, ed. Hackel (as in note 122 above), 67–87.

¹⁵⁷ PG 140:947–58.

¹⁵⁸ MM, I, no. cxxx, 287–94; trans. W. Helfer, "Das Testament des Patriarchen Isidoros (1347–1349/50)," *JÖBG* 17 (1968), 73–84.

Palaiologos' long absence in the West (1399–1402).¹⁵⁹ These patriarchal autobiographies seem to be a new feature. All the patriarchs in question came from a monastic background, which will explain the origin of their autobiographical testaments. They were acting in a way that might be expected of an abbot.¹⁶⁰

These patriarchal testaments were by no means the only autobiographical literature that appeared in Byzantium in the fourteenth century and later. The autobiographical impulse still retained much of its vigor. Autobiographical sketches, in the now traditional forms, continued to be produced. Monastic *typika* continued to be prefaced by autobiographical sketches. Theodora Synadene provides a particularly moving example for the "Lincoln College" *typikon* that she drew up for the nunnery of the Theotokos of Certain Hope at Constantinople.¹⁶¹ Authors still prefaced their works with brief autobiographies. Joseph Rhakendytes, commonly known as the "Philosopher," compiled an *Encyclopaedia* that remains one of the more intriguing literary productions of the early fourteenth century. It contains a brief autobiographical foreword that allowed him to describe his education in Constantinople in some detail. The autobiography is built around the author's decision, taken at a very young age, to adopt the contemplative life over the *vita activa*.¹⁶² This was also a question that engaged Theodore Metochites, notably in his *Ethikos*, composed about 1305 when he became Andronikos II's chief minister. He used it to survey his education and early career. As autobiography it is arid and theoretical, enlivened only by a genuine concern for his children.¹⁶³ Still later Demetrios Kydones (died ca. 1398), another Byzantine humanist who became chief minister, left an autobiography in the form of an apology for his conversion to Catholicism.¹⁶⁴

The autobiographical impulse in Byzantium was not confined to humanists and monastic founders, whether lay or cleric. There were always other forms of autobiography besides prefaces to monastic rules and wills and to literary collections. Bishops indulged in a peculiar form of autobiographical endeavor, the verse letter of abdication. The best known is that of Nicholas Mouzalon, who abdicated the throne of Cyprus. At 1,057 lines it is a substantial piece of work, written soon after his abdication around 1110.¹⁶⁵ At about the same time, Nicholas, bishop of Kerkyra, resigned his see and likewise wrote a verse letter of abdication, but it is less substantial, only 360 lines long.¹⁶⁶ Its tone is more general

¹⁵⁹ H. Hunger, "Das Testament des Patriarchen Matthaios I (1397–1410)," *BZ* 51 (1958), 288–309 (= H. Hunger, *Byzantinische Grundlagenforschung* [London, 1973], no. ix); I. M. Konidares and K. A. Manaphes, "Ἐπιτελεύτιος βούλησις καὶ διδασκαλία τοῦ οἰκουμενικοῦ πατριάρχου Ματθαίου Α' (1397–1410)," *Ἐπ. Ἐτ. Βυζ. Σπ.* 45 (1981/82), 472–510.

¹⁶⁰ V. Laurent, "Ecrits spirituels inédits de Macaire Choumnos," *Hellenika* 14 (1955), 76–85, for the spiritual testament (*epiteleitios homilia*) of a contemporary monastic leader.

¹⁶¹ H. Delehay, *Deux typica byzantins de l'époque des Paléologues* (Brussels, 1921), 20–25.

¹⁶² Ch. Walz, *Rhetores Graeci* (Stuttgart, 1834), 467–72.

¹⁶³ H. Hunger, "Der ἠθικός des Theodoros Metochites," *Πεπραγμένα τοῦ Θ' διεθνoῦς βυζαντινολογικοῦ συνεδρίου* (Athens, 1958), 141–58; I. Ševčenko, "Théodore Métochite, *Logos* 10," in *Civiltà bizantina* (as in note 123), 138–49.

¹⁶⁴ G. Mercati, *Notizie di Procoro e Dimitrio Cidone, Manuele Caleca e Teodoro Meliteniota*, ST 56 (Vatican City, 1931), 359–403; trans. H. G. Beck, "Die 'Apologia pro vita sua' des Demetrios Kydones," *OKS* 1 (1952), 208–25, 264–82. See F. Kianka, "The Apology of Demetrios Cydones," *ByzSt* 7 (1980), 57–71.

¹⁶⁵ S. Doanidou, "Ἡ παραίτησις Νικολάου τοῦ Μουζάλωνος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρχιεπισκοπῆς Κύπρου," *Hellenika* 7 (1934), 109–50. See Galatariotou, *Neophytos*, 192–99.

¹⁶⁶ Sp. Lampros, *Κερκυραϊκὰ ἀνέκδοτα* (Athens, 1882), 23–41.

than that of Mouzalon's poem, which provides a vivid picture of his election to the see of Cyprus and the difficulties that he faced once in office. Both bishops set out to justify their resignation. Their pieces were presumably designed to soften opinion against them in the patriarchal synod. Their appearance at the beginning of the twelfth century must be connected with the greater stress on the pastoral responsibilities of bishops associated with the patriarchate of Nicholas Grammatikos (1084–1111). This was in its turn part of the changing climate of the eleventh century.¹⁶⁷

Galatariotou has underlined how the travel report acquired a more obviously autobiographical stamp from the mid-twelfth century. The responses to the experience of travel were no longer marked by the objectivity and conventionality of the pilgrim account.¹⁶⁸ Constantine Manasses, for example, has left an account in verse of the voyage he made in 1161 to crusader Jerusalem as a member of a diplomatic mission. It is full of personal observation and prejudices. It is alive to local color and smells and reveals the author's changing moods and states of mind.¹⁶⁹ This immediacy is also apparent in Nicholas Mesarites' report to the abbot and monks of the Theotokos Evergetis monastery recounting his adventures on a journey from Constantinople to Nicaea in 1208.¹⁷⁰ These travel reports are not autobiographies: they do not aim to explain or justify a life, but their potential is revealed by Andreas Libadenos' autobiography written in the mid-fourteenth century. Its title, *Periegetike Historia*, might translate as "My Life as Travel." At the age of twelve he was in Egypt as a junior member of a Byzantine embassy; thereafter he moved around the Byzantine world, ending up in Trebizond. He presented his life as one dominated by the dangers of travel, from which Christ, his Mother, and the saints invariably delivered him.¹⁷¹

IX

The autobiographical impulse in Byzantium had its roots in a reevaluation of the personal and the individual, in a new preference for the subjective over the objective. Kazhdan has said à propos of an oration of Nikephoros Chrysoberges, a Byzantine man of letters of the late twelfth century: "Such rhetoric seeks as far as possible to 'deconcretise' reality, to substitute the abstract and the universal for the particular and local, and thus to transcend the deceptive multiplicity of perceived phenomena, and to convey the inner meaning, the unchanging idea, and timeless essence of events."¹⁷² That was the

¹⁶⁷ Angold, *Church and Society*, 252–62.

¹⁶⁸ C. Galatariotou, "Travel and Perception in Byzantium," *DOP* 47 (1993), 221–41. One has, however, to agree with C. Mango ("Chypre carrefour du monde byzantin," in *XVe Congrès international d'études byzantines*, V.5 [Athens, 1976], 10–11) against C. Galatariotou that Constantine Manasses' encounter with an evil-smelling Cypriot has very little to do with being tired and emotional and is much more a reflection of Constantinopolitan condescension. Galatariotou claims that Manasses admitted that his actions might not have met with total approval back in Constantinople. His words were: "And that was that, even if some may disapprove." But these refer to the way he knocked the man down. He was betraying Constantinopolitan sang froid and sullyng his hands with physical contact. It has nothing to do with his obvious disdain for a provincial, which would have been shared by other members of the Constantinopolitan elite.

¹⁶⁹ K. Horna, "Das Hodoiporikon des Konstantin Manasses," *BZ* 13 (1904), 325–47.

¹⁷⁰ A. Heisenberg, *Quellen und Studien zur spätbyzantinischen Geschichte* (London, 1973), no. II: II, iii, 35–46.

¹⁷¹ Ἀνδρέου Λιβαδηνοῦ βίος καὶ ἔργα, ed. O. Lampsides (Athens, 1975), 39–87. I am most grateful to Dr. Martin Hinterberger for drawing my attention to this text.

¹⁷² Kazhdan, *Byzantine Literature*, 242–43.

traditional aim of Byzantine literature, but it had been giving ground since the eleventh century to a more realistic and concrete approach. Kazhdan contrasts Chrysoberges' oration with one on the same episode by Nicholas Mesarites: "His narrative is frankly personal. He is involved in the events which he describes and he presents them from his own point of view."¹⁷³

Kazhdan points to the way a concern with the individual and with "the particular and the local" gave new substance to old literary genres. This was the main way in which Byzantine literary culture renewed itself. John Cantacuzene's *Memoirs* provide an excellent example.¹⁷⁴ They fulfill the criteria for autobiography rather better than Psellos' *Chronographia*, even if Misch chose to pass them by.¹⁷⁵ They constitute an *apologia* that Cantacuzene uses to exonerate himself from the charge that his ambitions produced the civil wars that tore Byzantium apart in the 1320s and 1340s. His defense was that he never wished to be emperor. The assumption of the imperial dignity was forced upon him by the envy and spite of his opponents. He hoped thereby to safeguard the interests of Byzantium. A desire to restore Byzantium to a semblance of its past greatness was the avowed purpose of Cantacuzene's life. His failure was a tragedy. Kazhdan puts it well: "In Byzantine literature Cantacuzene invented the poetry of heroic defeat. This is what constitutes the novelty and originality of his historical perspective." But heroic defeat has to revolve around a hero. That hero was Cantacuzene. In his *Memoirs* he presented his actions as though they were "dictated by the purest of sentiments," but ranged against him were "insurmountable obstacles, that made defeat, not something ordinary, but an event of grandiose proportions."¹⁷⁶

Cantacuzene could turn history into autobiography by virtue of his self-appointed role as tragic hero, but a tragic hero who was also emperor. The Byzantines understood the historical process to focus on the actions of an emperor. This was an assumption that allowed Cantacuzene to justify his appropriation for his own ends of the history of his own time.

In many ways, Cantacuzene's *Memoirs* have more in common with Michael Palaiologos' *Autobiography* than they do with Psellos' *Chronographia*. Though the form was different, their purposes were similar. Both emperors sought to justify their usurpations and their conduct of the imperial office. There is, however, one significant difference. While Michael Palaiologos gloried in his aristocratic descent, Cantacuzene has almost nothing to say about his forebears. He fails to give his father's name and makes identification of his grandparents impossible. His descent may not have been as glorious as often supposed. It may, of course, only have been that his father's early death had unhappy consequences for the standing of his side of the family. Cantacuzene may, however, have deliberately played down his aristocratic connections and ambitions. It suited the *persona* he

¹⁷³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁷⁴ John Cantacuzenus, *Historiarum Libri IV*, ed. L. Schopen and B. Niebuhr, 3 vols. (Bonn, 1828–32); trans. G. Fatouros and T. Krischer, *Geschichte*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1982–86). See Kazhdan, "L'Histoire de Cantacuzène," 279–335; D. M. Nicol, *The Reluctant Emperor: A Biography of John Cantacuzene, Byzantine Emperor and Monk, c. 1295–1383* (Cambridge, 1996); Hunger, *Literatur*, I, 465–75.

¹⁷⁵ Misch, *Geschichte*, II.2, 752, 827–28.

¹⁷⁶ Kazhdan, "L'Histoire de Cantacuzène," 287–88.

adopted of the “reluctant emperor” who, despite the cost, subordinated self-interest to the greater good of the common weal. This turned what purported to be history into autobiography.

Cantacuzene’s *Memoirs* support Kazhdan’s contention: a more pronounced emphasis on the personal and concrete helped to revitalize old genres of Byzantine literature. But, if we except the memoirs of Cantacuzene and Psellos, classicizing genres of Byzantine literature failed to provide a satisfactory outlet for the autobiographical impulse, whence disguised autobiographies and the other forms of experimentation that we have followed. The short autobiographical prefaces to monastic *typika* and to collected works cannot be dismissed as negligible. Some of them display a freshness and originality that is usually missing from Byzantine literature. Their scope was, however, very narrow. There was never any intention of providing a rounded autobiography. It was a particular role that found expression, but it was the role that so often gave meaning to a life. Blemmydes’ autobiographies reveal the literary potential of these sketches that had few pretensions to be literature in any conventional sense. His autobiographies represent a considerable achievement in the art of autobiography, however rebarbative modern sensibilities may find the personality they reveal.

Blemmydes created a new literary form in Byzantium capable of accommodating full-scale autobiography, but the literary possibilities he opened up were never properly exploited. This can be explained in terms of his suspect reputation. In his hands autobiography became autohagiography. Even if his autobiographies proved to be a dead end, they emphasize how pervasive the autobiographical element was in late Byzantine culture. It was sustained by a greater self-awareness, evident in the new stress on the individual that was common to both humanists and mystics. This, however, challenged traditional Byzantine literary culture, which was conventional and impersonal in the extreme. This was a potential source of conflict. Autobiography in disguise provided a way out.

There was another side to autobiography in Byzantium. Its initial impulse can be located from the turn of the tenth century in a monastic setting. Monastic leaders and reformers used autobiography to publicize their achievements and to justify and impose their ideas. Because the monastic connection was so pervasive, their example would later be followed by many others, ecclesiastics and laity alike. For some it was a means of self-assertion or of self-justification. It also had more modest ends: to allow a widow to express grief for the death of a husband or a bishop to remember a difficult uncle.

In purely literary terms, autobiography in Byzantium is a curiosity. Most Byzantine autobiographies were little more than sketches. There were only three substantial pieces of Byzantine autobiography. Two of these—those of Psellos and Cantacuzene—were memoirs and not strictly autobiographies. The one true autobiography, that of Blemmydes, found no imitators. Until recently it has not had the attention it deserves, because literary scholars have found it so hard to place. This is not surprising given its background, which is scarcely literary. Autobiography was not able to establish itself in Byzantium as a distinct genre. This failure stands in contrast to the ubiquity of the autobiographical impulse itself. It found expression in so many ways. It was open to a broad section of Byzantine society, not just to professional litterateurs. It served as a marker in

a way that conventional forms of literature could not. It can be used to plot the changing cultural climate. The reemergence of autobiography in the eleventh century was symptomatic of radical changes.

It has long been accepted that the eleventh century was a watershed of Byzantine history. C. Mango has, for example, drawn our attention to the "stylistic originality" of eleventh-century Byzantine art. He noted that "work of the ninth and tenth centuries often looks as if it had been reproduced from much earlier models without any creative transformation, whereas that of the eleventh century has more of a distinctive stamp. It has moved away from classicism towards a calligraphic and two-dimensional approach that is sometimes decorative and elegant . . . at other times forceful and severe."¹⁷⁷ Mango also underlines the originality of Psellos' *Chronographia*, which "is all the more striking in as much as it is not explicable in terms of prior development."¹⁷⁸ He tries to explain its originality in terms of "the rise of an urban bourgeoisie, to which Psellos himself belonged." But it was a bourgeoisie with a difference. Kazhdan has called its members "bourgeois gentry." They were rentiers who avoided direct involvement in business. They preferred service in the apparatus of church and state with its significantly higher rewards. The qualification was education. This created an intelligentsia, which remained prominent until the final fall of Byzantium. P. Magdalino has dubbed them the "Guardians of Orthodoxy."¹⁷⁹ This was also the background of many of the monastic leaders and reformers from the late tenth century. Their work and inspiration, culminating in the foundation of the Theotokos Evergetis in the mid-eleventh century, gave Byzantine monasticism a new purpose and dynamism.¹⁸⁰ It counted in a way that it had not done since the end of iconoclasm.

It was in this monastic milieu that autobiography in the sketchiest of guises reappeared in Byzantium. The intention was didactic rather than strictly literary. It conformed to a monastic leader's duty to instruct and inspire and underlined his role as a spiritual and moral arbiter. He was the Christian "philosopher." Michael Psellos also laid claim to the title of "philosopher," but in a quite different sense. He too used autobiography to emphasize his role as an arbiter of taste and a counselor of princes. He employed more obviously literary means. Both monastic leader and humanist claimed the right to pronounce on the ordering of a Christian society. The debate could no longer be reduced, as it had in the past, to the ideal relationship between the emperor and the church, if only because both monastic leader and humanist had identified the individual as the central problem. Both were equally hampered by the lack of any clear definition of society in a Byzantine context. Consequently, the problem presented by the individual in a Christian society could never be tackled directly. The debate always had a muted quality.¹⁸¹ Autobiography was a contribution to the debate, the terms of which were never clearly defined. This may help to explain why autobiography should have displayed the

¹⁷⁷ C. Mango, *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome* (London, 1980), 275.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁷⁹ Kazhdan, *Byzantine Literature*, 85–86; A. P. Kazhdan and A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 46–56; P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993), 316–412.

¹⁸⁰ Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium*, 64–142.

¹⁸¹ E.g., Kazhdan, *Byzantine Literature*, 140–67.

fragmented, subterranean, and disguised form that it did in Byzantium. But this had certain advantages. There was an emphasis on the individual; there was a greater self-awareness; there was more room for the expression of emotion. These were characteristics of Byzantine culture as it developed from the eleventh century. They mark it off from the more conventional and stilted qualities of an earlier period. The changing character of Byzantine culture is caught most vividly in art, for example, in the frescoes dated to 1164 of the church at Nerezi in Macedonia. These are among the greatest achievements of Byzantine art. In Mango's words, they "are highly stylized, yet charged with dramatic intensity."¹⁸² This is a judgment that could be applied with equal force to Blemmydes' autobiography.

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¹⁸²Mango, *Byzantium*, 275.